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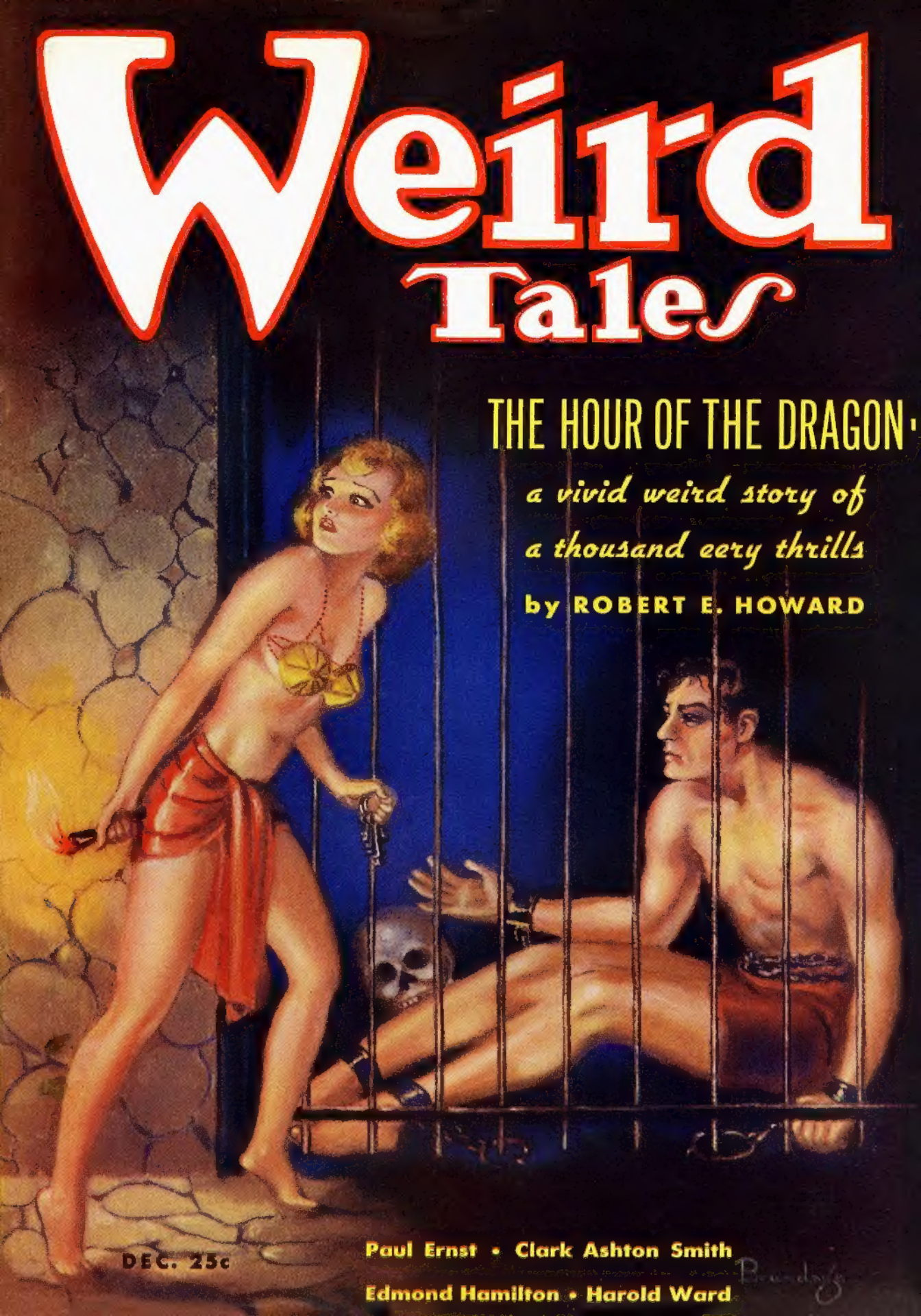

THE HOUR OF THE DRAGON

a vivid weird story of a thousand eery thrills

by ROBERT E. HOWARD

DEC. 25c

Paul Ernst • Clark Ashton Smith

Edmond Hamilton • Harold Ward

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Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Hour of the Dragon

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stirring and exciting weird story about a barbarian adventurer who made himself a king, and the strange talismanic jewel that was known as the Heart of Ahriman

1. O Sleeper, Awake!

THE long tapers flickered, sending the black shadows wavering along the walls, and the velvet tapestries rippled. Yet there was no wind in the chamber. Four men stood about the ebony table on which lay the green sarcophagus that gleamed like carven jade. In the upraised right hand of each man a curious black candle burned with a weird greenish light. Outside was night and a lost wind moaning among the black trees.

Inside the chamber was tense silence, and the wavering of the shadows, while four pairs of eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the long green case across which cryptic hieroglyphics writhed, as if lent life and movement by the unsteady light. The man at the foot of the sarcophagus leaned over it and moved his candle as if he were writing with a pen, inscribing a mystic symbol in the air. Then he set down the candle in its black gold stick at the foot of the case, and, mumbling some formula unintelligible to his companions, he thrust a broad white hand into his fur-trimmed robe. When he brought it forth again it was as if he cupped in his palm a ball of living fire.

The other three drew in their breath sharply, and the dark, powerful man who stood at the head of the sarcophagus whispered: "The Heart of Ahriman!" The other lifted a quick hand for silence. Somewhere a dog began howling dolefully, and a stealthy step padded outside the barred and bolted door. But none looked aside from the mummy-case over which the man in the ermine-trimmed robe was now moving the great flaming jewel while he muttered an incantation that was old when Atlantis sank. The glare of the gem dazzled their eyes, so that they could not be sure of what they saw; but with a splintering crash, the carven lid of the sarcophagus burst outward as if from some irresistible pressure applied from within, and the four men, bending eagerly forward, saw the occupant—a huddled, withered, wizened shape, with dried brown limbs like dead wood showing through moldering bandages.

"Bring that thing *back?*" muttered the small dark man who stood on the right, with a short, sardonic laugh. "It is ready to crumble at a touch. We are fools——"

"Shhh!" It was an urgent hiss of command from the large man who held the jewel. Perspiration stood upon his broad white forehead and his eyes were dilated. He leaned forward, and, without touching the thing with his hand, laid on the breast of the mummy the blazing jewel. Then he drew back and watched with fierce intensity, his lips moving in soundless invocation.

It was as if a globe of living fire flickered and burned on the dead, withered bosom. And breath sucked in, hissing, through the clenched teeth of the watchers. For as they watched, an awful transmutation became apparent. The with-

"A man—at least it looked like a man—wrapped in rags like a mummy."

ered shape in the sarcophagus was expanding, was growing, lengthening. The bandages burst and fell into brown dust. The shriveled limbs swelled, straightened. Their dusky hue began to fade.

"By Mitra!" whispered the tall, yellow-haired man on the left. "He was *not* a Stygian. That part at least was true."

Again a trembling finger warned for silence. The hound outside was no longer howling. He whimpered, as with an evil dream, and then that sound, too, died away in silence, in which the yellow-haired man plainly heard the straining of the heavy door, as if something outside pushed powerfully upon it. He half turned, his hand at his sword, but the man in the ermine robe hissed an urgent warning: "Stay! Do not break the chain! And on your life do not go to the door!"

THE yellow-haired man shrugged and turned back, and then he stopped short, staring. In the jade sarcophagus lay a living man: a tall, lusty man, naked, white of skin, and dark of hair and beard.

He lay motionless, his eyes wide open, and blank and unknowing as a newborn babe's. On his breast the great jewel smoldered and sparkled.

The man in ermine reeled as if from some let-down of extreme tension.

"Ishtar!" he gasped. "It is Xaltotun! —*and he lives!* Valerius! Tarascus! Amalric! Do you see? Do you see? You doubted me—but I have not failed! We have been close to the open gates of hell this night, and the shapes of darkness have gathered close about us—aye, they followed *him* to the very door—but we have brought the great magician back to life."

"And damned our souls to purgatories everlasting, I doubt not," muttered the small, dark man, Tarascus.

The yellow-haired man, Valerius, laughed harshly.

"What purgatory can be worse than life itself? So we are all damned together from birth. Besides, who would not sell his miserable soul for a throne?"

"There is no intelligence in his stare, Orastes," said the large man.

"He has long been dead," answered Orastes. "He is as one newly awakened. His mind is empty after the long sleep—nay, he was *dead,* not sleeping. We brought his spirit back over the voids and gulfs of night and oblivion. I will speak to him."

He bent over the foot of the sarcophagus, and fixing his gaze on the wide dark eyes of the man within, he said, slowly: "Awake, Xaltotun!"

The lips of the man moved mechanically. "Xaltotun!" he repeated in a groping whisper.

"*You* are Xaltotun!" exclaimed Orastes, like a hypnotist driving home his suggestions. "You are Xaltotun of Python, in Acheron."

A dim flame flickered in the dark eyes.

"I was Xaltotun," he whispered. "I am dead."

"You *are* Xaltotun!" cried Orastes. "You are not dead! You live!"

"I am Xaltotun," came the eery whisper. "But I am dead. In my house in Khemi, in Stygia, there I died."

"And the priests who poisoned you mummified your body with their dark arts, keeping all your organs intact!" exclaimed Orastes. "But now you live again! The Heart of Ahriman has restored your life, drawn your spirit back from space and eternity."

"The Heart of Ahriman!" The flame of remembrance grew stronger. "The barbarians stole it from me!"

"He remembers," muttered Orastes. "Lift him from the case."

The others obeyed hesitantly, as if reluctant to touch the man they had recreated, and they seemed not easier in their minds when they felt firm muscular flesh, vibrant with blood and life, beneath their fingers. But they lifted him upon the table, and Orastes clothed him in a curious dark velvet robe, splashed with gold stars and crescent moons, and fastened a cloth-of-gold fillet about his temples, confining the black wavy locks that fell to his shoulders. He let them do as they would, saying nothing, not even when they set him in a carven throne-like chair with a high ebony back and wide silver arms, and feet like golden claws. He sat there motionless, and slowly intelligence grew in his dark eyes and made them deep and strange and luminous. It was as if long-sunken witchlights floated slowly up through midnight pools of darkness.

Orastes cast a furtive glance at his companions, who stood staring in morbid fascination at their strange guest. Their iron nerves had withstood an ordeal that might have driven weaker men mad. He knew it was with no weaklings that he con-

spired, but men whose courage was as profound as their lawless ambitions and capacity for evil. He turned his attention to the figure in the ebon-black chair. And this one spoke at last.

"I remember," he said in a strong, resonant voice, speaking Nemedian with a curious, archaic accent. "I am Xaltotun, who was high priest of Set in Python, which was in Acheron. The Heart of Ahriman—I dreamed I had found it again—where is it?"

Orastes placed it in his hand, and he drew breath deeply as he gazed into the depths of the terrible jewel burning in his grasp.

"They stole it from me, long ago," he said. "The red heart of the night it is, strong to save or to damn. It came from afar, and from long ago. While I held it, none could stand before me. But it was stolen from me, and Acheron fell, and I fled an exile into dark Stygia. Much I remember, but much I have forgotten. I have been in a far land, across misty voids and gulfs and unlit oceans. What is the year?"

Orastes answered him. "It is the waning of the Year of the Lion, three thousand years after the fall of Acheron."

"Three thousand years!" murmured the other. "So long? Who are you?"

"I am Orastes, once a priest of Mitra. This man is Amalric, baron of Tor, in Nemedia; this other is Tarascus, younger brother of the king of Nemedia; and this tall man is Valerius, rightful heir of the throne of Aquilonia."

"Why have you given me life?" demanded Xaltotun. "What do you require of me?"

The man was now fully alive and awake, his keen eyes reflecting the working of an unclouded brain. There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his manner. He came directly to the point, as one who knows that no man gives something for nothing. Orastes met him with equal candor.

"We have opened the doors of hell this night to free your soul and return it to your body because we need your aid. We wish to place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia, and to win for Valerius the crown of Aquilonia. With your necromancy you can aid us."

Xaltotun's mind was devious and full of unexpected slants.

"You must be deep in the arts yourself, Orastes, to have been able to restore my life. How is it that a priest of Mitra knows of the Heart of Ahriman, and the incantations of Skelos?"

"I AM no longer a priest of Mitra," answered Orastes. "I was cast forth from my order because of my delving in black magic. But for Amalric there I might have been burned as a magician.

"But that left me free to pursue my studies. I journeyed in Zamora, in Vendhya, in Stygia, and among the haunted jungles of Khitai. I read the iron-bound books of Skelos, and talked with unseen creatures in deep wells, and faceless shapes in black reeking jungles. I obtained a glimpse of your sarcophagus in the demon-haunted crypts below the black giant-walled temple of Set in the hinterlands of Stygia, and I learned of the arts that would bring back life to your shriveled corpse. From moldering manuscripts I learned of the Heart of Ahriman. Then for a year I sought its hiding-place, and at last I found it."

"Then why trouble to bring me back to life?" demanded Xaltotun, with his piercing gaze fixed on the priest. "Why did you not employ the Heart to further your own power?"

"Because no man today knows the secrets of the Heart," answered Orastes.

"Not even in legends live the arts by which to loose its full powers. I knew it could restore life; of its deeper secrets I am ignorant. I merely used it to bring you back to life. It is the use of your knowledge we seek. As for the Heart, you alone know its awful secrets."

Xaltotun shook his head, staring broodingly into the flaming depths.

"My necromantic knowledge is greater than the sum of all the knowledge of other men," he said; "yet I do not know the full power of the jewel. I did not invoke it in the old days; I guarded it lest it be used against me. At last it was stolen, and in the hands of a feathered shaman of the barbarians it defeated all my mighty sorcery. Then it vanished, and I was poisoned by the jealous priests of Stygia before I could learn where it was hidden."

"It was hidden in a cavern below the temple of Mitra, in Tarantia," said Orastes. "By devious ways I discovered this, after I had located your remains in Set's subterranean temple in Stygia.

"Zamorian thieves, partly protected by spells I learned from sources better left unmentioned, stole your mummy-case from under the very talons of those which guarded it in the dark, and by camel-caravan and galley and ox-wagon it came at last to this city.

"Those same thieves—or rather those of them who still lived after their frightful quest—stole the Heart of Ahriman from its haunted cavern below the temple of Mitra, and all the skill of men and the spells of sorcerers nearly failed. One man of them lived long enough to reach me and give the jewel into my hands, before he died slavering and gibbering of what he had seen in that accursed crypt. The thieves of Zamora are the most faithful of men to their trust. Even with my conjurements, none but them could have stolen the Heart from where it has lain in demon-guarded darkness since the fall of Acheron, three thousand years ago."

Xaltotun lifted his lion-like head and stared far off into space, as if plumbing the lost centuries.

"Three thousand years!" he muttered. "Set! Tell me what has chanced in the world."

"The barbarians who overthrew Acheron set up new kingdoms," quoth Orastes. "Where the empire had stretched now rose realms called Aquilonia, and Nemedia, and Argos, from the tribes that founded them. The older kingdoms of Ophir, Corinthia and western Koth, which had been subject to the kings of Acheron, regained their independence with the fall of the empire."

"And what of the people of Acheron?" demanded Orastes. "When I fled into Stygia, Python was in ruins, and all the great, purple-towered cities of Acheron fouled with blood and trampled by the sandals of the barbarians."

"In the hills small groups of folk still boast descent from Acheron," answered Orastes. "For the rest, the tide of my barbarian ancestors rolled over them and wiped them out. They—my ancestors—had suffered much from the kings of Acheron."

A grim and terrible smile curled the Pythonian's lips.

"Aye! Many a barbarian, both man and woman, died screaming on the altar under this hand. I have seen their heads piled to make a pyramid in the great square in Python when the kings returned from the west with their spoils and naked captives."

"Aye. And when the day of reckoning came, the sword was not spared. So Acheron ceased to be, and purple-towered Python became a memory of forgotten days. But the younger kingdoms rose on the imperial ruins and waxed great.

And now we have brought you back to aid us to rule these kingdoms, which, if less strange and wonderful than Acheron of old, are yet rich and powerful, well worth fighting for. Look!" Orastes unrolled before the stranger a map drawn cunningly on vellum.

XALTOTUN regarded it, and then shook his head, baffled.

"The very outlines of the land are changed. It is like some familiar thing seen in a dream, fantastically distorted."

"Howbeit," answered Orastes, tracing with his forefinger, "here is Belverus, the capital of Nemedia, in which we now are. Here run the boundaries of the land of Nemedia. To the south and southeast are Ophir and Corinthia, to the east Brythunia, to the west Aquilonia."

"It is the map of a world I do not know," said Xaltotun softly, but Orastes did not miss the lurid fire of hate that flickered in his dark eyes.

"It is a map you shall help us change," answered Orastes. "It is our desire first to set Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia. We wish to accomplish this without strife, and in such a way that no suspicion will rest on Tarascus. We do not wish the land to be torn by civil wars, but to reserve all our power for the conquest of Aquilonia.

"Should King Nimed and his sons die naturally, in a plague for instance, Tarascus would mount the throne as the next heir, peacefully and unopposed."

Xaltotun nodded, without replying, and Orastes continued.

"The other task will be more difficult. We cannot set Valerius on the Aquilonian throne without a war, and that kingdom is a formidable foe. Its people are a hardy, war-like race, toughened by continual wars with the Picts, Zingarians and Cimmerians. For five hundred years Aquilonia and Nemedia have intermittently waged war, and the ultimate advantage has always lain with the Aquilonians.

"Their present king is the most renowned warrior among the western nations. He is an outlander, an adventurer who seized the crown by force during a time of civil strife, strangling King Namedides with his own hands, upon the very throne. His name is Conan, and no man can stand before him in battle.

"Valerius is now the rightful heir of the throne. He had been driven into exile by his royal kinsman, Namedides, and has been away from his native realm for years, but he is of the blood of the old dynasty, and many of the barons would secretly hail the overthrow of Conan, who is a nobody without royal or even noble blood. But the common people are loyal to him, and the nobility of the outlying provinces. Yet if his forces were overthrown in the battle that must first take place, and Conan himself slain, I think it would not be difficult to put Valerius on the throne. Indeed, with Conan slain, the only center of the government would be gone. He is not part of a dynasty, but only a lone adventurer."

"I wish that I might see this king," mused Xaltotun, glancing toward a silvery mirror which formed one of the panels of the wall. This mirror cast no reflection, but Xaltotun's expression showed that he understood its purpose, and Orastes nodded with the pride a good craftsman takes in the recognition of his accomplishments by a master of his craft.

"I will try to show him to you," he said. And seating himself before the mirror, he gazed hypnotically into its depths, where presently a dim shadow began to take shape.

It was uncanny, but those watching knew it was no more than the reflected

image of Orastes' thought, embodied in that mirror as a wizard's thoughts are embodied in a magic crystal. It floated hazily, then leaped into startling clarity —a tall man, mightily shouldered and deep of chest, with a massive corded neck and heavily muscled limbs. He was clad in silk and velvet, with the royal lions of Aquilonia worked in gold upon his rich jupon, and the crown of Aquilonia shone on his square-cut black mane; but the great sword at his side seemed more natural to him than the regal accouterments. His brow was low and broad, his eyes a volcanic blue that smoldered as if with some inner fire. His dark, scarred, almost sinister face was that of a fighting-man, and his velvet garments could not conceal the hard, dangerous lines of his limbs.

"That man is no Hyborian!" exclaimed Xaltotun.

"No; he is a Cimmerian, one of those wild tribesmen who dwell in the gray hills of the north."

"I fought his ancestors of old," muttered Xaltotun. "Not even the kings of Acheron could conquer them."

"They still remain a terror to the nations of the south," answered Orastes. "He is a true son of that savage race, and has proved himself, thus far, unconquerable."

Xaltotun did not reply; he sat staring down at the pool of living fire that shimmered in his hand. Outside, the hound howled again, long and shudderingly.

2. *A Black Wind Blows*

THE Year of the Dragon had birth in war and pestilence and unrest. The black plague stalked through the streets of Belverus, striking down the merchant in his stall, the serf in his kennel, the knight at his banquet board. Before it the arts of the leeches were helpless. Men said it had been sent from hell as punishment for the sins of pride and lust. It was swift and deadly as the stroke of an adder. The victim's body turned purple and then black, and within a few minutes he sank down dying, and the stench of his own putrefaction was in his nostrils even before death wrenched his soul from his rotting body. A hot, roaring wind blew incessantly from the south, and the crops withered in the fields, the cattle sank and died in their tracks.

Men cried out on Mitra, and muttered against the king; for somehow, throughout the kingdom, the word was whispered that the king was secretly addicted to loathsome practises and foul debauches in the seclusion of his nighted palace. And then in that palace death stalked grinning on feet about which swirled the monstrous vapors of the plague. In one night the king died with his three sons, and the drums that thundered their dirge drowned the grim and ominous bells that rang from the carts that lumbered through the streets gathering up the rotting dead.

That night, just before dawn, the hot wind that had blown for weeks ceased to rustle evilly through the silken window curtains. Out of the north rose a great wind that roared among the towers, and there was cataclysmic thunder, and blinding sheets of lightning, and driving rain. But the dawn shone clean and green and clear; the scorched ground veiled itself in grass, the thirsty crops sprang up anew, and the plague was gone—its miasma swept clean out of the land by the mighty wind.

Men said the gods were satisfied because the evil king and his spawn were slain, and when his young brother Tarascus was crowned in the great coronation hall, the populace cheered until the tow-

ers rocked, acclaiming the monarch on whom the gods smiled.

Such a wave of enthusiasm and rejoicing as swept the land is frequently the signal for a war of conquest. So no one was surprized when it was announced that King Tarascus had declared the truce made by the late king with their western neighbors void, and was gathering his hosts to invade Aquilonia. His reason was candid; his motives, loudly proclaimed, gilded his actions with something of the glamor of a crusade. He espoused the cause of Valerius, "rightful heir to the throne;" he came, he proclaimed, not as an enemy of Aquilonia, but as a friend, to free the people from the tyranny of a usurper and a foreigner.

If there were cynical smiles in certain quarters, and whispers concerning the king's good friend Amalric, whose vast personal wealth seemed to be flowing into the rather depleted royal treasury, they were unheeded in the general wave of fervor and zeal of Tarascus's popularity. If any shrewd individuals suspected that Amalric was the real ruler of Nemedia, behind the scenes, they were careful not to voice such heresy. And the war went forward with enthusiasm.

The king and his allies moved westward at the head of fifty thousand men—knights in shining armor with their pennons streaming above their helmets, pikemen in steel caps and brigandines, crossbowmen in leather jerkins. They crossed the border, took a frontier castle and burned three mountain villages, and then, in the valley of the Valkia, ten miles west of the boundary line, they met the hosts of Conan, king of Aquilonia—forty-five thousand knights, archers and men-at-arms, the flower of Aquilonian strength and chivalry. Only the knights of Poitain, under Prospero, had not yet arrived, for they had far to ride up from the southwestern corner of the kingdom. Tarascus had struck without warning. His invasion had come on the heels of his proclamation, without formal declaration of war.

The two hosts confronted each other across a wide, shallow valley, with rugged cliffs, and a shallow stream winding through masses of reeds and willows down the middle of the vale. The camp-followers of both hosts came down to this stream for water, and shouted insults and hurled stones across at one another. The last glints of the sun shone on the golden banner of Nemedia with the scarlet dragon, unfurled in the breeze above the pavilion of King Tarascus on an eminence near the eastern cliffs. But the shadow of the western cliffs fell like a vast purple pall across the tents and the army of Aquilonia, and upon the black banner with its golden lion that floated above King Conan's pavilion.

All night the fires flared the length of the valley, and the wind brought the call of trumpets, the clangor of arms, and the sharp challenges of the sentries who paced their horses along either edge of the willow-grown stream.

It was in the darkness before dawn that King Conan stirred on his couch, which was no more than a pile of silks and furs thrown on a dais, and awakened. He started up, crying out sharply and clutching at his sword. Pallantides, his commander, rushing in at the cry, saw his king sitting upright, his hand on his hilt, and perspiration dripping from his strangely pale face.

"Your Majesty!" exclaimed Pallantides. "Is aught amiss?"

"What of the camp?" demanded Conan. "Are the guards out?"

"Five hundred horsemen patrol the stream, Your Majesty," answered the general. "The Nemedians have not of-

fered to move against us in the night. They wait for dawn, even as we."

"By Crom," muttered Conan. "I awoke with a feeling that doom was creeping on me in the night."

He stared up at the great golden lamp which shed a soft glow over the velvet hangings and carpets of the great tent. They were alone; not even a slave or a page slept on the carpeted floor; but Conan's eyes blazed as they were wont to blaze in the teeth of great peril, and the sword quivered in his hand. Pallantides watched him uneasily. Conan seemed to be listening.

"Listen!" hissed the king. "Did you hear it? A furtive step!"

"Seven knights guard your tent, Your Majesty," said Pallantides. "None could approach it unchallenged."

"Not outside," growled Conan. "It seemed to sound *inside* the tent."

Pallantides cast a swift, startled look around. The velvet hangings merged with shadows in the corners, but if there had been anyone in the pavilion besides themselves, the general would have seen him. Again he shook his head.

"There is no one here, sire. You sleep in the midst of your host."

"I have seen death strike a king in the midst of thousands," muttered Conan. "Something that walks on invisible feet and is not seen——"

"Perhaps you were dreaming, Your Majesty," said Pallantides, somewhat perturbed.

"So I was," grunted Conan. "A devilish strange dream it was, too. I trod again all the long, weary roads I traveled on my way to the kingship."

He fell silent, and Pallantides stared at him unspeaking. The king was an enigma to the general, as to most of his civilized subjects. Pallantides knew that Conan had walked many strange roads in his wild, eventful life, and had been many things before a twist of Fate set him on the throne of Aquilonia.

"I saw again the battlefield whereon I was born," said Conan, resting his chin moodily on a massive fist. "I saw myself in a pantherskin loin-clout, throwing my spear at the mountain beasts. I was a mercenary swordsman again, a hetman of the *kozaki* who dwell along the Zaporoska River, a corsair looting the coasts of Kush, a pirate of the Barachan Isles, a chief of the Himelian hillmen. All these things I've been, and of all these things I dreamed; all the shapes that have been *I* passed like an endless procession, and their feet beat out a dirge in the sounding dust.

"But throughout my dreams moved strange, veiled figures and ghostly shadows, and a far-away voice mocked me. And toward the last I seemed to see myself lying on this dais in my tent, and a shape bent over me, robed and hooded. I lay unable to move, and then the hood fell away and a moldering skull grinned down at me. Then it was that I awoke."

"This is an evil dream, Your Majesty," said Pallantides, suppressing a shudder. "But no more."

Conan shook his head, more in doubt than in denial. He came of a barbaric race, and the superstitions and instincts of his heritage lurked close beneath the surface of his consciousness.

"I've dreamed many evil dreams," he said, "and most of them were meaningless. But by Crom, this was not like most dreams! I wish this battle were fought and won, for I've had a grisly premonition ever since King Nimed died in the black plague. Why did it cease when he died?"

"Men say he sinned——"

"Men are fools, as always," grunted Conan. "If the plague struck all who

sinned, then by Crom, there wouldn't be enough left to count the living! Why should the gods—who the priests tell me are just—slay five hundred peasants and merchants and nobles before they slew the king, if the whole pestilence were aimed at him? Were the gods smiting blindly, like swordsmen in a fog? By Mitra, if I aimed my strokes no straighter, Aquilonia would have had a new king long ago.

"No! The black plague's no common pestilence. It lurks in Stygian tombs, and is called forth into being only by wizards. I was a swordsman in Prince Almuric's army that invaded Stygia, and of his thirty thousand, fifteen thousand perished by Stygian arrows, and the rest by the black plague that rolled on us like a wind out of the south. I was the only man who lived."

"Yet only five hundred died in Nemedia," argued Pallantides.

"Whoever called it into being knew how to cut it short at will," answered Conan. "So I know there was something planned and diabolical about it. Someone called it forth, someone banished it when the work was completed—when Tarascus was safe on the throne and being hailed as the deliverer of the people from the wrath of the gods. By Crom, I sense a black, subtle brain behind all this. What of this stranger who men say gives counsel to Tarascus?"

"He wears a veil," answered Pallantides; "they say he is a foreigner; a stranger from Stygia."

"A stranger from Stygia!" repeated Conan scowling. "A stranger from hell, more like!—Ha! What is that?"

"The trumpets of the Nemedians!" exclaimed Pallantides. "And hark, how our own blare upon their heels! Dawn is breaking, and the captains are marshaling the hosts for the onset! Mitra be with them, for many will not see the sun go down behind the crags."

"Send my squires to me!" exclaimed Conan, rising with alacrity and casting off his velvet night-garment; he seemed to have forgotten his forebodings at the prospect of action. "Go to the captains and see that all is in readiness. I will be with you as soon as I don my armor."

MANY of Conan's ways were inexplicable to the civilized people he ruled, and one of them was his insistence on sleeping alone in his chamber or tent. Pallantides hastened from the pavilion, clanking in the armor he had donned at midnight after a few hours' sleep. He cast a swift glance over the camp, which was beginning to swarm with activity, mail clinking and men moving about dimly in the uncertain light, among the long lines of tents. Stars still glimmered palely in the western sky, but long pink streamers stretched along the eastern horizon, and against them the dragon banner of Nemedia flung out its billowing silken folds.

Pallantides turned toward a smaller tent near by, where slept the royal squires. These were tumbling out already, roused by the trumpets. And as Pallantides called to them to hasten, he was frozen speechless by a deep fierce shout and the impact of a heavy blow inside the king's tent, followed by the heart-stopping crash of a falling body. There sounded a low laugh that turned the general's blood to ice.

Echoing the cry, Pallantides wheeled and rushed back into the pavilion. He cried out again as he saw Conan's powerful frame stretched out on the carpet. The king's great two-handed sword lay near his hand, and a shattered tent-pole seemed to show where his stroke had fallen. Pallantides' sword was out, and he

glared about the tent, but nothing met his gaze. Save for the king and himself it was empty, as it had been when he left it.

"Your Majesty!" Pallantides threw himself on his knee beside the fallen giant.

Conan's eyes were open; they blazed up at him with full intelligence and recognition. His lips writhed, but no sound came forth. He seemed unable to move.

Voices sounded without. Pallantides rose swiftly and stepped to the door. The royal squires and one of the knights who guarded the tent stood there.

"We heard a sound within," said the knight apologetically. "Is all well with the king?"

Pallantides regarded him searchingly.

"None has entered or left the pavilion this night?"

"None save yourself, my lord," answered the knight, and Pallantides could not doubt his honesty.

"The king stumbled and dropped his sword," said Pallantides briefly. "Return to your post."

As the knight turned away, the general covertly motioned to the five royal squires, and when they had followed him in, he drew the flap closely. They turned pale at sight of the king stretched upon the carpet, but Pallantides' quick gesture checked their exclamations.

The general bent over him again, and again Conan made an effort to speak. The veins in his temples and the cords in his neck swelled with his efforts, and he lifted his head clear of the ground. Voice came at last, mumbling and half intelligible.

"The thing—the thing in the corner!"

Pallantides lifted his head and looked fearfully about him. He saw the pale faces of the squires in the lamplight, the velvet shadows that lurked along the walls of the pavilion. That was all.

"There is nothing here, Your Majesty," he said.

"It was there, in the corner," muttered the king, tossing his lion-maned head from side to side in his efforts to rise. "A man—at least he looked like a man—wrapped in rags like a mummy's bandages, with a moldering cloak drawn about him, and a hood. All I could see was his eyes, as he crouched there in the shadows. I thought he was a shadow himself, until I saw his eyes. They were like black jewels.

"I made at him and swung my sword, but I missed him clean — how, Crom knows—and splintered that pole instead. He caught my wrist as I staggered off balance, and his fingers burned like hot iron. All the strength went out of me, and the floor rose and struck me like a club. Then he was gone, and I was down, and—curse him!—I can't move! I'm paralyzed!"

Pallantides lifted the giant's hand, and his flesh crawled. On the king's wrist showed the blue marks of long, lean fingers. What hand could grip so hard as to leave its print on that thick wrist? Pallantides remembered that low laugh he had heard as he rushed into the tent, and cold perspiration beaded his skin. It had not been Conan who laughed.

"This is a thing diabolical!" whispered a trembling squire. "Men say the children of darkness war for Tarascus!"

"BE SILENT!" ordered Pallantides sternly.

Outside, the dawn was dimming the stars. A light wind sprang up from the peaks, and brought the fanfare of a thousand trumpets. At the sound a convulsive shudder ran through the king's mighty form. Again the veins in his temples knotted as he strove to break the invisible shackles which crushed him down.

"Put my harness on me and tie me into

my saddle," he whispered. "I'll lead the charge yet!"

Pallantides shook his head, and a squire plucked his skirt.

"My lord, we are lost if the host learns the king has been smitten! Only he could have led us to victory this day."

"Help me lift him on the dais," answered the general.

They obeyed, and laid the helpless giant on the furs, and spread a silken cloak over him. Pallantides turned to the five squires and searched their pale faces long before he spoke.

"Our lips must be sealed for ever as to what happens in this tent," he said at last. "The kingdom of Aquilonia depends upon it. One of you go and fetch me the officer Valannus, who is a captain of the Pellian spearmen."

The squire indicated bowed and hastened from the tent, and Pallantides stood staring down at the stricken king, while outside trumpets blared, drums thundered, and the roar of the multitudes rose in the growing dawn. Presently the squire returned with the officer Pallantides had named—a tall man, broad and powerful, built much like the king. Like him, also, he had thick black hair. But his eyes were gray and he did not resemble Conan in his features.

"The king is stricken by a strange malady," said Pallantides briefly. "A great honor is yours; you are to wear his armor and ride at the head of the host today. None must know that it is not the king who rides."

"It is an honor for which a man might gladly give up his life," stammered the captain, overcome by the suggestion. "Mitra grant that I do not fail of this mighty trust!"

And while the fallen king stared with burning eyes that reflected the bitter rage and humiliation that ate his heart, the squires stripped Valannus of mail shirt, burganet and leg-pieces, and clad him in Conan's armor of black plate-mail, with the vizored salade, and the dark plumes nodding over the wivern crest. Over all they put the silken surcoat with the royal lion worked in gold upon the breast, and they girt him with a broad gold-buckled belt which supported a jewel-hilted broadsword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard. While they worked, trumpets clamored outside, arms clanged, and across the river rose a deep-throated roar as squadron after squadron swung into place.

Full-armed, Valannus dropped to his knee and bent his plumes before the figure that lay on the dais.

"Lord king, Mitra grant that I do not dishonor the harness I wear this day!"

"Bring me Tarascus's head and I'll make you a baron!" In the stress of his anguish Conan's veneer of civilization had fallen from him. His eyes flamed, he ground his teeth in fury and blood-lust, as barbaric as any tribesmen in the Cimmerian hills.

3. The Cliffs Reel

THE Aquilonian host was drawn up, long serried lines of pikemen and horsemen in gleaming steel, when a giant figure in black armor emerged from the royal pavilion, and as he swung up into the saddle of the black stallion held by four squires, a roar that shook the mountains went up from the host. They shook their blades and thundered forth their acclaim of their warrior king—knights in gold-chased armor, pikemen in mail coats and basinets, archers in their leather jerkins, with their longbows in their left hands.

The host on the opposite side of the valley was in motion, trotting down the long gentle slope toward the river; their steel shone through the mists of morning that swirled about their horses' feet.

The Aquilonian host moved leisurely to meet them. The measured tramp of the armored horses made the ground tremble. Banners flung out long silken folds in the morning wind; lances swayed like a bristling forest, dipped and sank, their pennons fluttering about them.

Ten men-at-arms, grim, taciturn veterans who could hold their tongues, guarded the royal pavilion. One squire stood in the tent, peering out through a slit in the doorway. But for the handful in the secret, no one else in the vast host knew that it was not Conan who rode on the great stallion at the head of the army.

The Aquilonian host had assumed the customary formation: the strongest part was the center, composed entirely of heavily armed knights; the wings were made up of smaller bodies of horsemen, mounted men-at-arms, mostly, supported by pikemen and archers. The latter were Bossonians from the western marches, strongly built men of medium stature, in leathern jackets and iron head-pieces.

The Nemedian army came on in similar formation, and the two hosts moved toward the river, the wings in advance of the centers. In the center of the Aquilonian host the great lion banner streamed its billowing black folds over the steel-clad figure on the black stallion.

But on his dais in the royal pavilion Conan groaned in anguish of spirit, and cursed with strange heathen oaths.

"The hosts move together," quoth the squire, watching from the door. "Hear the trumpets peal! Ha! The rising sun strikes fire from lance-heads and helmets until I am dazzled. It turns the river crimson—aye, it will be truly crimson before this day is done!

"The foe have reached the river. Now arrows fly between the hosts like stinging clouds that hide the sun. Ha! Well loosed, bowmen! The Bossonians have the better of it! Hark to them shout!"

Faintly in the ears of the king, above the din of trumpets and clanging steel, came the deep fierce shout of the Bossonians as they drew and loosed in perfect unison.

"Their archers seek to hold ours in play while their knights ride into the river," said the squire. "The banks are not steep; they slope to the water's edge. The knights come on, they crash through the willows. By Mitra, the clothyard shafts find every crevice of their harness! Horses and men go down, struggling and thrashing in the water. It is not deep, nor is the current swift, but men are drowning there, dragged under by their armor, and trampled by the frantic horses. Now the knights of Aquilonia advance. They ride into the water and engage the knights of Nemedia. The water swirls about their horses' bellies and the clang of sword against sword is deafening."

"Crom!" burst in agony from Conan's lips. Life was coursing sluggishly back into his veins, but still he could not lift his mighty frame from the dais.

"The wings close in," said the squire. "Pikemen and swordsmen fight hand to hand in the stream, and behind them the bowmen ply their shafts.

"By Mitra, the Nemedian arbalesters are sorely harried, and the Bossonians arch their arrows to drop amid the rear ranks. Their center gains not a foot, and their wings are pushed back up from the stream again."

"Crom, Ymir, and Mitra!" raged Conan. "Gods and devils, could I but reach the fighting, if but to die at the first blow!"

OUTSIDE through the long hot day the battle stormed and thundered. The valley shook to charge and countercharge, to the whistling of shafts, and the crash of rending shields and splintering lances. But the hosts of Aquilonia

held fast. Once they were forced back from the bank, but a counter-charge, with the black banner flowing over the black stallion, regained the lost ground. And like an iron rampart they held the right bank of the stream, and at last the squire gave Conan the news that the Nemedians were falling back from the river.

"Their wings are in confusion!" he cried. "Their knights reel back from the sword-play. But what is this? Your banner is in motion—the center sweeps into the stream! By Mitra, Valannus is leading the host across the river!"

"Fool!" groaned Conan. "It may be a trick. He should hold his position; by dawn Prospero will be here with the Poitanian levies."

"The knights ride into a hail of arrows!" cried the squire. "But they do not falter! They sweep on — they have crossed! They charge up the slope! Pallantides has hurled the wings across the river to their support! It is all he can do. The lion banner dips and staggers above the mêlée.

"The knights of Nemedia make a stand. They are broken! They fall back! Their left wing is in full flight, and our pikemen cut them down as they run! I see Valannus, riding and smiting like a madman. He is carried beyond himself by the fighting-lust. Men no longer look to Pallantides. They follow Valannus, deeming him Conan, as he rides with closed vizor.

"But look! There is method in his madness! He swings wide of the Nemedian front, with five thousand knights, the pick of the army. The main host of the Nemedians is in confusion—and look! Their flank is protected by the cliffs, but there is a defile left unguarded! It is like a great cleft in the wall that opens again behind the Nemedian lines. By Mitra, Valannus sees and seizes the opportunity! He has driven their wing before him, and he leads his knights toward that defile. They swing wide of the main battle; they cut through a line of spearmen, they charge into the defile!"

"An ambush!" cried Conan, striving to struggle upright.

"No!" shouted the squire exultantly. "The whole Nemedian host is in full sight! They have forgotten the defile! They never expected to be pushed back that far. Oh, fool, fool, Tarascus, to make such a blunder! Ah, I see lances and pennons pouring from the farther mouth of the defile, beyond the Nemedian lines. They will smite those ranks from the rear and crumple them. *Mitra, what is this?"*

He staggered as the walls of the tent swayed drunkenly. Afar over the thunder of the fight rose a deep bellowing roar, indescribably ominous.

"The cliffs reel!" shrieked the squire. "Ah, gods, what is this? The river foams out of its channel, and the peaks are crumbling! The ground shakes and horses and riders in armor are overthrown! The cliffs! The cliffs are falling!"

With his words there came a grinding rumble and a thunderous concussion, and the ground trembled. Over the roar of the battle sounded screams of mad terror.

"The cliffs have crumbled!" cried the livid squire. "They have thundered down into the defile and crushed every living creature in it! I saw the lion banner wave an instant amid the dust and falling stones, and then it vanished! Ha, the Nemedians shout with triumph! Well may they shout, for the fall of the cliffs has wiped out five thousand of our bravest knights—hark!"

To Conan's ears came a vast torrent of sound, rising and rising in frenzy: *"The king is dead! The king is dead! Flee! Flee! The king is dead!"*

"Liars!" panted Conan. "Dogs! Knaves! Cowards! Oh, Crom, if I could

but stand—but crawl to the river with my sword in my teeth! How, boy, do they flee?"

"Aye!" sobbed the squire. "They spur for the river; they are broken, hurled on like spume before a storm. I see Pallantides striving to stem the torrent—he is down, and the horses trample him! They rush into the river, knights, bowmen, pikemen, all mixed and mingled in one mad torrent of destruction. The Nemedians are on their heels, cutting them down like corn."

"But they will make a stand on this side of the river!" cried the king. With an effort that brought the sweat dripping from his temples, he heaved himself up on his elbows.

"Nay!" cried the squire. "They cannot! They are broken! Routed! Oh gods, that I should live to see this day!"

Then he remembered his duty and shouted to the men-at-arms who stood stolidly watching the flight of their comrades. "Get a horse, swiftly, and help me lift the king upon it. We dare not bide here."

But before they could do his bidding, the first drift of the storm was upon them. Knights and spearmen and archers fled among the tents, stumbling over ropes and baggage, and mingled with them were Nemedian riders, who smote right and left at all alien figures. Tent-ropes were cut, fire sprang up in a hundred places, and the plundering had already begun. The grim guardsmen about Conan's tent died where they stood, smiting and thrusting, and over their mangled corpses beat the hoofs of the conquerors.

But the squire had drawn the flap close, and in the confused madness of the slaughter none realized that the pavilion held an occupant. So the flight and the pursuit swept past, and roared away up the valley, and the squire looked out presently to see a cluster of men approaching the royal tent with evident purpose.

"Here comes the king of Nemedia with four companions and his squire," quoth he. "He will accept your surrender, my fair lord——"

"Surrender the devil's heart!" gritted the king.

He had forced himself up to a sitting posture. He swung his legs painfully off the dais, and staggered upright, reeling drunkenly. The squire ran to assist him, but Conan pushed him away.

"Give me that bow!" he gritted, indicating a longbow and quiver that hung from a tent-pole.

"But Your Majesty!" cried the squire in great perturbation. "The battle is lost! It were the part of majesty to yield with the dignity becoming one of royal blood!"

"I have no royal blood," ground Conan. "I am a barbarian and the son of a blacksmith."

WRENCHING away the bow and an arrow he staggered toward the opening of the pavilion. So formidable was his appearance, naked but for short leather breeks and sleeveless shirt, open to reveal his great, hairy chest, with his huge limbs and his blue eyes blazing under his tangled black mane, that the squire shrank back, more afraid of his king than of the whole Nemedian host.

Reeling on wide-braced legs Conan drunkenly tore the door-flap open and staggered out under the canopy. The king of Nemedia and his companions had dismounted, and they halted short, staring in wonder at the apparition confronting them.

"Here I am, you jackals!" roared the Cimmerian. "I am the king! Death to you, dog-brothers!"

He jerked the arrow to its head and

loosed, and the shaft feathered itself in the breast of the knight who stood beside Tarascus. Conan hurled the bow at the king of Nemedia.

"Curse my shaky hand! Come in and take me if you dare!"

Reeling backward on unsteady legs, he fell with his shoulders against a tent-pole, and propped upright, he lifted his great sword with both hands.

"By Mitra, it *is* the king!" swore Tarascus. He cast a swift look about him, and laughed. "That other was a jackal in his harness! In, dogs, and take his head!"

The three soldiers—men-at-arms wearing the emblem of the royal guards—rushed at the king, and one felled the squire with a blow of a mace. The other two fared less well. As the first rushed in, lifting his sword, Conan met him with a sweeping stroke that severed mail-links like cloth, and sheared the Nemedian's arm and shoulder clean from his body. His corpse, pitching backward, fell across his companion's legs. The man stumbled, and before he could recover, the great sword was through him.

Conan wrenched out his steel with a racking gasp, and staggered back against the tent-pole. His great limbs trembled, his chest heaved, and sweat poured down his face and neck. But his eyes flamed with exultant savagery and he panted: "Why do you stand afar off, dog of Belverus? I can't reach you; come in and die!"

Tarascus hesitated, glanced at the remaining man-at-arms, and his squire, a gaunt, saturnine man in black mail, and took a step forward. He was far inferior in size and strength to the giant Cimmerian, but he was in full armor, and was famed in all the western nations as a swordsman. But his squire caught his arm.

"Nay, Your Majesty, do not throw away your life. I will summon archers to shoot this barbarian, as we shoot lions."

NEITHER of them had noticed that a chariot had approached while the fight was going on, and now came to a halt before them. But Conan saw, looking over their shoulders, and a queer chill sensation crawled along his spine. There was something vaguely unnatural about the appearance of the black horses that drew the vehicle, but it was the occupant of the chariot that arrested the king's attention.

He was a tall man, superbly built, clad in a long unadorned silk robe. He wore a Shemitish head-dress, and its lower folds hid his features, except for the dark, magnetic eyes. The hands that grasped the reins, pulling the rearing horses back on their haunches, were white but strong. Conan glared at the stranger, all his primitive instincts roused. He sensed an aura of menace and power that exuded from this veiled figure, a menace as definite as the windless waving of tall grass that marks the path of the serpent.

"Hail, Xaltotun!" exclaimed Tarascus. "Here is the king of Aquilonia! He did not die in the landslide as we thought."

"I know," answered the other, without bothering to say how he knew. "What is your present intention?"

"I will summon the archers to slay him," answered the Nemedian. "As long as he lives he will be dangerous to us."

"Yet even a dog has uses," answered Xaltotun. "Take him alive."

Conan laughed raspingly. "Come in and try!" he challenged. "But for my treacherous legs I'd hew you out of that chariot like a woodman hewing a tree. But you'll never take me alive, damn you!"

"He speaks the truth, I fear," said Tarascus. "The man is a barbarian, with

the senseless ferocity of a wounded tiger. Let me summon the archers."

"Watch me and learn wisdom," advised Xaltotun.

His hand dipped into his robe and came out with something shining—a glistening sphere. This he threw suddenly at Conan. The Cimmerian contemptuously struck it aside with his sword—at the instant of contact there was a sharp explosion, a flare of white, blinding flame, and Conan pitched senseless to the ground.

"He is dead?" Tarascus's tone was more assertion than inquiry.

"No. He is but senseless. He will recover his senses in a few hours. Bid your men bind his arms and legs and lift him into my chariot."

With a gesture Tarascus did so, and they heaved the senseless king into the chariot, grunting with their burden. Xaltotun threw a velvet cloak over his body, completely covering him from any who might peer in. He gathered the reins in his hands.

"I'm for Belverus," he said. "Tell Amalric that I will be with him if he needs me. But with Conan out of the way, and his army broken, lance and sword should suffice for the rest of the conquest. Prospero cannot be bringing more than ten thousand men to the field, and will doubtless fall back to Tarantia when he hears the news of the battle. Say nothing to Amalric or Valerius or anyone about our capture. Let them think Conan died in the fall of the cliffs."

He looked at the man-at-arms for a long space, until the guardsman moved restlessly, nervous under the scrutiny.

"What is that about your waist?" Xaltotun demanded.

"Why, my girdle, may it please you, my lord!" stuttered the amazed guardsman.

"You lie!" Xaltotun's laugh was merciless as a sword-edge. "It is a poisonous serpent! What a fool you are, to wear a reptile about your waist!"

With distended eyes the man looked down; and to his utter horror he saw the buckle of his girdle rear up at him. It *was* a snake's head! He saw the evil eyes and the dripping fangs, heard the hiss and felt the loathsome contact of the thing about his body. He screamed hideously and struck at it with his naked hand, felt its fangs flesh themselves in that hand—and then he stiffened and fell heavily. Tarascus looked down at him without expression. He saw only the leathern girdle and the buckle, the pointed tongue of which was stuck in the guardsman's palm. Xaltotun turned his hypnotic gaze on Tarascus's squire, and the man turned ashen and began to tremble, but the king interposed: "Nay, we can trust him."

The sorcerer tautened the reins and swung the horses around.

"See that this piece of work remains secret. If I am needed, let Altaro, Orastes' servant, summon me as I have taught him. I will be in your palace at Belverus."

Tarascus lifted his hand in salutation, but his expression was not pleasant to see as he looked after the departing mesmerist.

"Why should he spare the Cimmerian?" whispered the frightened squire.

"That I am wondering myself," grunted Tarascus.

Behind the rumbling chariot the dull roar of battle and pursuit faded in the distance; the setting sun rimmed the cliffs with scarlet flame, and the chariot moved into the vast blue shadows floating up out of the east.

4. *"From What Hell Have You Crawled?"*

OF THAT long ride in the chariot of Xaltotun, Conan knew nothing. He lay like a dead man while the bronze

wheels clashed over the stones of mountain roads and swished through the deep grass of fertile valleys, and finally dropping down from the rugged heights, rumbled rhythmically along the broad white road that winds through the rich meadowlands to the walls of Belverus.

Just before dawn some faint reviving of life touched him. He heard a mumble of voices, the groan of ponderous hinges. Through a slit in the cloak that covered him he saw, faintly in the lurid glare of torches, the great black arch of a gateway, and the bearded faces of men-at-arms, the torches striking fire from their spearheads and helmets.

"How went the battle, my fair lord?" spoke an eager voice, in the Nemedian tongue.

"Well indeed," was the curt reply. "The king of Aquilonia lies slain and his host is broken."

A babble of excited voices rose, drowned the next instant by the whirling wheels of the chariot on the flags. Sparks flashed from under the revolving rims as Xaltotun lashed his steeds through the arch. But Conan heard one of the guardsmen mutter: "From beyond the border to Belverus between sunset and dawn! And the horses scarcely sweating! By Mitra, they——" Then silence drank the voices, and there was only the clatter of hoofs and wheels along the shadowy street.

What he had heard registered itself on Conan's brain but suggested nothing to him. He was like a mindless automaton that hears and sees, but does not understand. Sights and sounds flowed meaninglessly about him. He lapsed again into a deep lethargy, and was only dimly aware when the chariot halted in a deep, high-walled court, and he was lifted from it by many hands and borne up a winding stone stair, and down a long dim corridor. Whispers, stealthy footsteps, unrelated sounds surged or rustled about him, irrelevant and far away.

Yet his ultimate awakening was abrupt and crystal-clear. He possessed full knowledge of the battle in the mountains and its sequences, and he had a good idea of where he was.

He lay on a velvet couch, clad as he was the day before, but with his limbs loaded with chains not even he could break. The room in which he lay was furnished with somber magnificence, the walls covered with black velvet tapestries, the floor with heavy purple carpets. There was no sign of door or window, and one curiously carven gold lamp, swinging from the fretted ceiling, shed a lurid light over all.

In that light the figure seated in a silver, throne-like chair before him seemed unreal and fantastic, with an illusiveness of outline that was heightened by a filmy silken robe. But the features were distinct—unnaturally so in that uncertain light. It was almost as if a weird nimbus played about the man's head, casting the bearded face into bold relief, so that it was the only definite and distinct reality in that mystic, ghostly chamber.

It was a magnificent face, with strongly chiseled features of classical beauty. There was, indeed, something disquieting about the calm tranquillity of its aspect, a suggestion of more than human knowledge, of a profound certitude beyond human assurance. Also an uneasy sensation of familiarity twitched at the back of Conan's consciousness. He had never seen this man's face before, he well knew; yet those features reminded him of something or someone. It was like encountering in the flesh some dream-image that had haunted one in nightmares.

"Who are you?" demanded the king belligerently, struggling to a sitting position in spite of his chains.

"Men call me Xaltotun," was the reply, in a strong, golden voice.

"What place is this?" the Cimmerian next demanded.

"A chamber in the palace of King Tarascus, in Belverus."

Conan was not surprized. Belverus, the capital, was at the same time the largest Nemedian city so near the border.

"And where's Tarascus?"

"With the army."

"Well," growled Conan, "if you mean to murder me, why don't you do it and get it over with?"

"I did not save you from the king's archers to murder you in Belverus," answered Xaltotun.

"What the devil did you do to me?" demanded Conan.

"I blasted your consciousness," answered Xaltotun. "How, you would not understand. Call it black magic, if you will."

Conan had already reached that conclusion, and was mulling over something else.

"I think I understand why you spared my life," he rumbled. "Amalric wants to keep me as a check on Valerius, in case the impossible happens and he becomes king of Aquilonia. It's well known that the baron of Tor is behind this move to seat Valerius on my throne. And if I know Amalric, he doesn't intend that Valerius shall be anything more than a figurehead, as Tarascus is now."

"Amalric knows nothing of your capture," answered Xaltotun. "Neither does Valerius. Both think you died at Valkia."

Conan's eyes narrowed as he stared at the man in silence.

"I sensed a brain behind all this," he muttered, "but I thought it was Amalric's. Are Amalric, Tarascus and Valerius all but puppets dancing on your string? Who are you?"

"What does it matter? If I told you, you would not believe me. What if I told you I might set you back on the throne of Aquilonia?"

Conan's eyes burned on him like a wolf.

"What's your price?"

"Obedience to me."

"Go to hell with your offer!" snarled Conan. "I'm no figurehead. I won my crown with my sword. Besides, it's beyond your power to buy and sell the throne of Aquilonia at your will. The kingdom's not conquered; one battle doesn't decide a war."

"You war against more than swords," answered Xaltotun. "Was it a mortal's sword that felled you in your tent before the fight? Nay, it was a child of the dark, a waif of outer space, whose fingers were afire with the frozen coldness of the black gulfs, which froze the blood in your veins and the marrow of your thews. Coldness so cold it burned your flesh like white-hot iron!

"Was it chance that led the man who wore your harness to lead his knights into the defile? — chance that brought the cliffs crashing down upon them?"

CONAN glared at him unspeaking, feeling a chill along his spine. Wizards and sorcerers abounded in his barbaric mythology, and any fool could tell that this was no common man. Conan sensed an inexplicable something about him that set him apart—an alien aura of Time and Space, a sense of tremendous and sinister antiquity. But his stubborn spirit refused to flinch.

"The fall of the cliffs was chance," he muttered truculently. "The charge into the defile was what any man would have done."

"Not so. You would not have led a charge into it. You would have suspected a trap. You would never have crossed the river in the first place, until you were

sure the Nemedian rout was real. Hypnotic suggestions would not have invaded your mind, even in the madness of battle, to make you mad, and rush blindly into the trap laid for you, as it did the lesser man who masqueraded as you."

"Then if this was all planned," Conan grunted skeptically, "all a plot to trap my host, why did not the 'child of darkness' kill me in my tent?"

"Because I wished to take you alive. It took no wizardry to predict that Pallantides would send another man out in your harness. I wanted you alive and unhurt. You may fit into my scheme of things. There is a vital power about you greater than the craft and cunning of my allies. You are a bad enemy, but might make a fine vassal."

Conan spat savagely at the word, and Xaltotun, ignoring his fury, took a crystal globe from a near-by table and placed it before him. He did not support it in any way, nor place it on anything, but it hung motionless in midair, as solidly as if it rested on an iron pedestal. Conan snorted at this bit of necromancy, but he was nevertheless impressed.

"Would you know of what goes on in Aquilonia?" he asked.

Conan did not reply, but the sudden rigidity of his form betrayed his interest.

Xaltotun stared into the cloudy depths, and spoke: "It is now the evening of the day after the battle of Valkia. Last night the main body of the army camped by Valkia, while squadrons of knights harried the fleeing Aquilonians. At dawn the host broke camp and pushed westward through the mountains. Prospero, with ten thousand Poitanians, was miles from the battlefield when he met the fleeing survivors in the early dawn. He had pushed on all night, hoping to reach the field before the battle joined. Unable to rally the remnants of the broken host, he fell back toward Tarantia. Riding hard, replacing his wearied horses with steeds seized from the countryside, he approaches Tarantia.

"I see his weary knights, their armor gray with dust, their pennons drooping as they push their tired horses through the plain. I see, also, the streets of Tarantia. The city is in turmoil. Somehow word has reached the people of the defeat and the death of King Conan. The mob is mad with fear, crying out that the king is dead, and there is none to lead them against the Nemedians. Giant shadows rush on Aquilonia from the east, and the sky is black with vultures."

Conan cursed deeply.

"What are these but words? The raggedest beggar in the street might prophesy as much. If you say you saw all that in the glass ball, then you're a liar as well as a knave, of which last there's no doubt! Prospero will hold Tarantia, and the barons will rally to him. Count Trocero of Poitain commands the kingdom in my absence, and he'll drive these Nemedian dogs howling back to their kennels. What are fifty thousand Nemedians? Aquilonia will swallow them up. They'll never see Belverus again. It's not Aquilonia which was conquered at Valkia; it was only Conan."

"Aquilonia is doomed," answered Xaltotun, unmoved. "Lance and ax and torch shall conquer her; or if they fail, powers from the dark of ages shall march against her. As the cliffs fell at Valkia, so shall walled cities and mountains fall, if the need arise, and rivers roar from their channels to drown whole provinces.

"Better if steel and bowstring prevail without further aid from the *arts,* for the constant use of mighty spells sometimes sets forces in motion that might rock the universe."

"From what hell have you crawled, you nighted dog?" muttered Conan, staring at the man. The Cimmerian involuntarily

shivered; he sensed something incredibly ancient, incredibly evil. . . .

XALTOTUN lifted his head, as if listening to whispers across the void. He seemed to have forgotten his prisoner. Then he shook his head impatiently, and glanced impersonally at Conan.

"What? Why, if I told you, you would not believe me. But I am wearied of conversation with you; it is less fatiguing to destroy a walled city than it is to frame my thoughts in words a brainless barbarian can understand."

"If my hands were free," opined Conan, "I'd soon make a brainless corpse out of you."

"I do not doubt it, if I were fool enough to give you the opportunity," answered Xaltotun, clapping his hands.

His manner had changed; there was impatience in his tone, and a certain nervousness in his manner, though Conan did not think this attitude was in any way connected with himself.

"Consider what I have told you, barbarian," said Xaltotun. "You will have plenty of leisure. I have not yet decided what I shall do with you. It depends on circumstances yet unborn. But let this be impressed upon you: that if I decide to use you in my game, it will be better to submit without resistance than to suffer my wrath."

Conan spat a curse at him, just as hangings that masked a door swung apart and four giant negroes entered. Each was clad only in a silken breech-clout supported by a girdle, from which hung a great key.

Xaltotun gestured impatiently toward the king and turned away, as if dismissing the matter entirely from his mind. His fingers twitched queerly. From a carven green jade box he took a handful of shimmering black dust, and placed it in a brazier which stood on a golden tripod at his elbow. The crystal globe, which he seemed to have forgotten, fell suddenly to the floor, as if its invisible support had been removed.

Then the blacks had lifted Conan—for so loaded with chains was he that he could not walk—and carried him from the chamber. A glance back, before the heavy, gold-bound teak door was closed, showed him Xaltotun leaning back in his throne-like chair, his arms folded, while a thin wisp of smoke curled up from the brazier. Conan's scalp prickled. In Stygia, that ancient and evil kingdom that lay far to the south, he had seen such black dust before. It was the pollen of the black lotus, which creates death-like sleep and monstrous dreams; and he knew that only the grisly wizards of the Black Ring, which is the nadir of evil, voluntarily seek the scarlet nightmares of the black lotus, to revive their necromantic powers.

The Black Ring was a fable and a lie to most folk of the western world, but Conan knew of its ghastly reality, and its grim votaries who practise their abominable sorceries amid the black vaults of Stygia and the nighted domes of accursed Sabatea.

He glanced back at the cryptic, gold-bound door, shuddering at what it hid.

Whether it was day or night the king could not tell. The palace of King Tarascus seemed a shadowy, nighted place, that shunned natural illumination. The spirit of darkness and shadow hovered over it, and that spirit, Conan felt, was embodied in the stranger Xaltotun. The negroes carried the king along a winding corridor so dimly lighted that they moved through it like black ghosts bearing a dead man, and down a stone stair that wound endlessly. A torch in the hand of one cast the great deformed shadows streaming along the wall; it

was like the descent into hell of a corpse borne by dusky demons.

At last they reached the foot of the stair, and then they traversed a long straight corridor, with a blank wall on one hand pierced by an occasional arched doorway with a stair leading up behind it; and on the other hand another wall showing heavy barred doors at regular intervals of a few feet.

Halting before one of these doors, one of the blacks produced the key that hung at his girdle, and turned it in the lock. Then, pushing open the grille, they entered with their captive. They were in a small dungeon with heavy stone walls, floor and ceiling, and in the opposite wall there was another grilled door. What lay beyond that door Conan could not tell, but he did not believe it was another corridor. The glimmering light of the torch, flickering through the bars, hinted at shadowy spaciousness and echoing depths.

In one corner of the dungeon, near the door through which they had entered, a cluster of rusty chains hung from a great iron ring set in the stone. In these chains a skeleton dangled. Conan glared at it with some curiosity, noticing the state of the bare bones, most of which were splintered and broken; the skull, which had fallen from the vertebræ, was crushed as if by some savage blow of tremendous force.

Stolidly one of the blacks, not the one who had opened the door, removed the chains from the ring, using his key on the massive lock, and dragged the mass of rusty metal and shattered bones over to one side. Then they fastened Conan's chains to that ring, and the third black turned *his* key in the lock of the farther door, grunting when he had assured himself that it was properly fastened.

Then they regarded Conan cryptically, slit-eyed ebony giants, the torch striking highlights from their glossy skin.

He who held the key to the nearer door was moved to remark, gutturally: "This your palace now, white dog-king! None but master and we know. All palace sleep. We keep secret. You live and die here, maybe. Like him!" He contemptuously kicked the shattered skull and sent it clattering across the stone floor.

Conan did not deign to reply to the taunt, and the black, galled perhaps by his prisoner's silence, muttered a curse, stooped and spat full in the king's face. It was an unfortunate move for the black. Conan was seated on the floor, the chains about his waist; ankles and wrists locked to the ring in the wall. He could neither rise, nor move more than a yard out from the wall. But there was considerable slack in the chains that shackled his wrists, and before the bullet-shaped head could be withdrawn out of reach, the king gathered this slack in his mighty hand and smote the black on the head. The man fell like a butchered ox, and his comrades stared to see him lying with his scalp laid open, and blood oozing from his nose and ears.

But they attempted no reprisal, nor did they accept Conan's urgent invitation to approach within reach of the bloody chain in his hand. Presently, grunting in their ape-like speech, they lifted the senseless black and bore him out like a sack of wheat, arms and legs dangling. They used his key to lock the door behind them, but did not remove it from the gold chain that fastened it to his girdle. They took the torch with them, and as they moved up the corridor the darkness slunk behind them like an animate thing. Their soft padding footsteps died away, with the glimmer of their torch, and darkness and silence remained unchallenged.

5. The Haunter of the Pits

CONAN lay still, enduring the weight of his chains and the despair of his position with the stoicism of the wilds that had bred him. He did not move, because the jangle of his chains, when he shifted his body, sounded startlingly loud in the darkness and stillness, and it was his instinct, born of a thousand wilderness-bred ancestors, not to betray his position in his helplessness. This did not result from a logical reasoning process; he did not lie quiet because he reasoned that the darkness hid lurking dangers that might discover him in his helplessness. Xaltotun had assured him that he was not to be harmed, and Conan believed that it was in the man's interest to preserve him, at least for the time being. But the instincts of the wild were there, that had caused him in his childhood to lie hidden and silent while wild beasts prowled about his covert.

Even his keen eyes could not pierce the solid darkness. Yet after a while, after a period of time he had no way of estimating, a faint glow became apparent, a sort of slanting gray beam, by which Conan could see, vaguely, the bars of the door at his elbow, and even make out the skeleton of the other grille. This puzzled him, until at last he realized the explanation. He was far below ground, in the pits below the palace; yet for some reason a shaft had been constructed from somewhere above. Outside, the moon had risen to a point where its light slanted dimly down the shaft. He reflected that in this manner he could tell the passing of the days and nights. Perhaps the sun, too, would shine down that shaft, though on the other hand it might be closed by day. Perhaps it was a subtle method of torture, allowing a prisoner but a glimpse of daylight or moonlight.

His gaze fell on the broken bones in the farther corner, glimmering dimly. He did not tax his brain with futile speculation as to who the wretch had been and for what reason he had been doomed, but he wondered at the shattered condition of the bones. They had not been broken on a rack. Then, as he looked, another unsavory detail made itself evident. The shin-bones were split lengthwise, and there was but one explanation; they had been broken in that manner in order to obtain the marrow. Yet what creature but man breaks bones for their marrow? Perhaps those remnants were mute evidence of a horrible, cannibalistic feast, of some wretch driven to madness by starvation. Conan wondered if his own bones would be found at some future date, hanging in their rusty chains. He fought down the unreasoning panic of a trapped wolf.

The Cimmerian did not curse, scream, weep or rave as a civilized man might have done. But the pain and turmoil in his bosom were none the less fierce. His great limbs quivered with the intensity of his emotions. Somewhere, far to the westward, the Nemedian host was slashing and burning its way through the heart of his kingdom. The small host of the Poitanians could not stand before them. Prospero might be able to hold Tarantia for weeks, or months; but eventually, if not relieved, he must surrender to greater numbers. Surely the barons would rally to him against the invaders. But in the meanwhile he, Conan, must lie helpless in a darkened cell, while others led his spears and fought for his kingdom. The king ground his powerful teeth in red rage.

Then he stiffened as outside the farther door he heard a stealthy step. Straining his eyes he made out a bent, indistinct figure outside the grille. There was a rasp of metal against metal, and he heard the clink of tumblers, as if a key had been

turned in the lock. Then the figure moved silently out of his range of vision. Some guard, he supposed, trying the lock. After a while he heard the sound repeated faintly somewhere farther on, and that was followed by the soft opening of a door, and then a swift scurry of softly shod feet retreated in the distance. Then silence fell again.

Conan listened for what seemed a long time, but which could not have been, for the moon still shone down the hidden shaft, but he heard no further sound. He shifted his position at last, and his chains clanked. Then he heard another, lighter footfall—a soft step outside the nearer door, the door through which he had entered the cell. An instant later a slender figure was etched dimly in the gray light.

"King Conan!" a soft voice intoned urgently. "Oh, my lord, are you there?"

"Where else?" he answered guardedly, twisting his head about to stare at the apparition.

It was a girl who stood grasping the bars with her slender fingers. The dim glow behind her outlined her supple figure through the wisp of silk twisted about her loins, and shone vaguely on jeweled breast-plates. Her dark eyes gleamed in the shadows, her white limbs glistened softly, like alabaster. Her hair was a mass of dark foam, at the burnished luster of which the dim light only hinted.

"The keys to your shackles and to the farther door!" she whispered, and a slim white hand came through the bars and dropped three objects with a clink to the flags beside him.

"What game is this?" he demanded. "You speak in the Nemedian tongue, and I have no friends in Nemedia. What deviltry is your master up to now? Has he sent you here to mock me?"

"It is no mockery!" The girl was trembling violently. Her bracelets and breast-plates clinked against the bars she grasped. "I swear by Mitra! I stole the keys from the black jailers. They are the keepers of the pits, and each bears a key which will open only one set of locks. I made them drunk. The one whose head you broke was carried away to a leech, and I could not get his key. But the others I stole. Oh, please do not loiter! Beyond these dungeons lie the pits which are the doors to hell."

SOMEWHAT impressed, Conan tried the keys dubiously, expecting to meet only failure and a burst of mocking laughter. But he was galvanized to discover that one, indeed, loosed him of his shackles, fitting not only the lock that held them to the ring, but the locks on his limbs as well. A few seconds later he stood upright, exulting fiercely in his comparative freedom. A quick stride carried him to the grille, and his fingers closed about a bar and the slender wrist that was pressed against it, imprisoning the owner, who lifted her face bravely to his fierce gaze.

"Who are you, girl?" he demanded. "Why do you do this?"

"I am only Zenobia," she murmured, with a catch of breathlessness, as if in fright; "only a girl of the king's seraglio."

"Unless this is some cursed trick," muttered Conan, "I cannot see why you bring me these keys."

She bowed her dark head, and then lifted it and looked full into his suspicious eyes. Tears sparkled like jewels on her long dark lashes.

"I am only a girl of the king's seraglio," she said, with a certain proud humility. "He has never glanced at me, and probably never will. I am less than one of the dogs that gnaw the bones in his banquet hall.

"But I am no painted toy; I am of flesh and blood. I breathe, hate, fear, re-

joice and love. And I have loved you, King Conan, ever since I saw you riding at the head of your knights along the streets of Belverus when you visited King Nimed, years ago. My heart tugged at its strings to leap from my bosom and fall in the dust of the street under your horse's hoofs."

Color flooded her countenance as she spoke, but her dark eyes did not waver. Conan did not at once reply; wild and passionate and untamed he was, yet any but the most brutish of men must be touched with a certain awe or wonder at the baring of a woman's naked soul.

She bent her head then, and pressed her red lips to the fingers that imprisoned her slim wrist. Then she flung up her head as if in sudden recollection of their position, and terror flared in her dark eyes.

"Haste!" she whispered urgently. "It is past midnight. You must be gone."

"But won't they skin you alive for stealing these keys?"

"They'll never know. If the black men remember in the morning who gave them the wine, they will not dare admit the keys were stolen from them while they were drunk. The key that I could not obtain is the one that unlocks this door. You must make your way to freedom through the pits. What awful perils lurk beyond that door I cannot even guess. But greater danger lurks for you if you remain in this cell.

"King Tarascus has returned——"

"What? Tarascus?"

"Aye! He has returned, in great secrecy, and not long ago he descended into the pits and then came out again, pale and shaking, like a man who has dared a great hazard. I heard him whisper to his squire, Arideus, that despite Xaltotun you should die."

"What of Xaltotun?" murmured Conan.

He felt her shudder.

"Do not speak of him!" she whispered. "Demons are often summoned by the sound of their names. The slaves say that he lies in his chamber, behind a bolted door, dreaming the dreams of the black lotus. I believe that even Tarascus secretly fears him, or he would slay you openly. But he has been in the pits tonight, and what he did here, only Mitra knows."

"I wonder if that could have been Tarascus who fumbled at my cell door awhile ago?" muttered Conan.

"Here is a dagger!" she whispered, pressing something through the bars. His eager fingers closed on an object familiar to their touch. "Go quickly through yonder door, turn to the left and make your way along the cells until you come to a stone stair. On your life do not stray from the line of the cells! Climb the stair and open the door at the top; one of the keys will fit it. If it be the will of Mitra, I will await you there." Then she was gone, with a patter of light slippered feet.

CONAN shrugged his shoulders, and turned toward the farther grille. This might be some diabolical trap planned by Tarascus, but plunging headlong into a snare was less abhorrent to Conan's temperament than sitting meekly to await his doom. He inspected the weapon the girl had given him, and smiled grimly. Whatever else she might be, she was proven by that dagger to be a person of practical intelligence. It was no slender stiletto, selected because of a jeweled hilt or gold guard, fitted only for dainty murder in milady's boudoir; it was a forthright poniard, a warrior's weapon, broad-bladed, fifteen inches in length, tapering to a diamond-sharp point.

He grunted with satisfaction. The feel of the hilt cheered him and gave him a

glow of confidence. Whatever webs of conspiracy were drawn about him, whatever trickery and treachery ensnared him, this knife was real. The great muscles of his right arm swelled in anticipation of murderous blows.

He tried the farther door, fumbling with the keys as he did so. It was not locked. Yet he remembered the black man locking it. That furtive, bent figure, then, had been no jailer seeing that the bolts were in place. He had unlocked the door, instead. There was a sinister suggestion about that unlocked door. But Conan did not hesitate. He pushed open the grille and stepped from the dungeon into the outer darkness.

As he had thought, the door did not open into another corridor. The flagged floor stretched away under his feet, and the line of cells ran away to right and left behind him, but he could not make out the other limits of the place into which he had come. He could see neither the roof nor any other wall. The moonlight filtered into that vastness only through the grilles of the cells, and was almost lost in the darkness. Less keen eyes than his could scarcely have discerned the dim gray patches that floated before each cell door.

Turning to the left, he moved swiftly and noiselessly along the line of dungeons, his bare feet making no sound on the flags. He glanced briefly into each dungeon as he passed it. They were all empty, but locked. In some he caught the glimmer of naked white bones. These pits were a relic of a grimmer age, constructed long ago when Belverus was a fortress rather than a city. But evidently their more recent use had been more extensive than the world guessed.

Ahead of him, presently, he saw the dim outline of a stair sloping sharply upward, and knew it must be the stair he sought. Then he whirled suddenly, crouching in the deep shadows at its foot.

Somewhere behind him something was moving—something bulky and stealthy that padded on feet which were not human feet. He was looking down the long row of cells, before each one of which lay a square of dim gray light that was little more than a patch of less dense darkness. But he saw something moving along these squares. What it was he could not tell, but it was heavy and huge, and yet it moved with more than human ease and swiftness. He glimpsed it as it moved across the squares of gray, then lost it as it merged in the expanses of shadow between. It was uncanny, in its stealthy advance, appearing and disappearing like a blur of the vision.

He heard the bars rattle as it tried each door in turn. Now it had reached the cell he had so recently quitted, and the door swung open as it tugged. He saw a great bulky shape limned faintly and briefly in the gray doorway, and then the thing had vanished into the dungeon. Sweat beaded Conan's face and hands. Now he knew why Tarascus had come so subtly to his door, and later had fled so swiftly. The king had unlocked his door, and, somewhere in these hellish pits, had opened a cell or cage that held some grim monstrosity.

Now the thing was emerging from the cell and was again advancing up the corridor, its misshapen head close to the ground. It paid no more heed to the locked doors. It was smelling out his trail. He saw it more plainly now; the gray light limned a giant anthropomorphic body, but vaster of bulk and girth than any man. It went on two legs, though it stooped forward, and it was grayish and shaggy, its thick coat shot with silver. Its head was a grisly travesty of the human, its long arms hung nearly to the ground.

Conan knew it at last—understood the

meaning of those crushed and broken bones in the dungeon, and recognized the haunter of the pits. It was a gray ape, one of the grisly man-eaters from the forests that wave on the mountainous eastern shores of the Sea of Vilayet. Half mythical and altogether horrible, these apes were the goblins of Hyborian legendry, and were in reality ogres of the natural world, cannibals and murderers of the nighted forests.

He knew it scented his presence, for it was coming swiftly now, rolling its barrel-like body rapidly along on its short, mighty, bowed legs. He cast a quick glance up the long stair, but knew that the thing would be on his back before he could mount to the distant door. He chose to meet it face to face.

CONAN stepped out into the nearest square of moonlight, so as to have all the advantage of illumination that he could; for the beast, he knew, could see better than himself in the dark. Instantly the brute saw him; its great yellow tusks gleamed in the shadows, but it made no sound. Creatures of night and the silence, the gray apes of Vilayet were voiceless. But in its dim, hideous features, which were a bestial travesty of a human face, showed ghastly exultation.

Conan stood poised, watching the oncoming monster without a quiver. He knew he must stake his life on one thrust; there would be no chance for another; nor would there be time to strike and spring away. The first blow must kill, and kill instantly, if he hoped to survive that awful grapple. He swept his gaze over the short, squat throat, the hairy swagbelly, and the mighty breast, swelling in giant arches like twin shields. It must be the heart; better to risk the blade being deflected by the heavy ribs than to strike in where a stroke was not instantly fatal. With full realization of the odds, Conan matched his speed of eye and hand and his muscular power against the brute might and ferocity of the man-eater. He must meet the brute breast to breast, strike a death-blow, and then trust to the ruggedness of his frame to survive the instant of manhandling that was certain to be his.

As the ape came rolling in on him, swinging wide its terrible arms, he plunged in between them and struck with all his desperate power. He felt the blade sink to the hilt in the hairy breast, and instantly, releasing it, he ducked his head and bunched his whole body into one compact mass of knotted muscles, and as he did so he grasped the closing arms and drove his knee fiercely into the monster's belly, bracing himself against that crushing grapple.

For one dizzy instant he felt as if he were being dismembered in the grip of an earthquake; then suddenly he was free, sprawling on the floor, and the monster was gasping out its life beneath him, its red eyes turned upward, the hilt of the poniard quivering in its breast. His desperate stab had gone home.

Conan was panting as if after long conflict, trembling in every limb. Some of his joints felt as if they had been dislocated, and blood dripped from scratches on his skin where the monster's talons had ripped; his muscles and tendons had been savagely wrenched and twisted. If the beast had lived a second longer, it would surely have dismembered him. But the Cimmerian's mighty strength had resisted, for the fleeting instant it had endured, the dying convulsion of the ape that would have torn a lesser man limb from limb.

Don't miss the thrilling and exciting chapters in next month's WEIRD TALES, that tell of the rending of the Veil, the rescue of a beautiful woman from the headsman's ax in the Iron Tower, and the weird help given Conan by the strange priests of Asura. Reserve your copy at your news dealer's now.

"He drew a knife from under his burnoose and put a bowl under her feet."

Dancing Feet

By PAUL ERNST

A story of the Caid of Hamam Meknes in the Sahara desert, and the young white wife who displeased him—a grim tale, through which blows a breath of horror

WE KNEW her only as Mademoiselle d'Or. None of us knew where she came from. Some said Russia, for she spoke Russian like a native. Some said from the south of France, and that she had fled here to avoid a political scandal. Some said from the Saar. But none of us knew, and none of

us cared. You didn't care where Mademoiselle d'Or was from, so long as you could be with her.

She was small, beautifully formed. She had tawny hair, and topaz eyes with a deep mysticism in them. Her skin was tanned a light gold in spite of the fact that she kept out of the sun as every woman must in Hamam Meknes on the eastern fringe of the Sahara.

But it was her feet and legs that one remarked on most. She had the daintiest small feet and slender ankles, and the loveliest, lithe legs. Dainty, small feet. Dancing feet. Dancing their way into the hearts of all of us.

She used to spend much of her time at the Café Penny, where the French officers in charge of the Hamam Meknes post came, and where I, as local manager of a farm machinery corporation, often went with Arab customers. Most afternoons at three-thirty or four she would come there, a cool and lovely golden figure in the blazing sun. And the reception was ever the same.

"*Voilà!* Mam'selle d'Or!"

"A dance, a dance!"

Sometimes she would smile and refuse. Oftener, she would oblige.

There was a phonograph in the rear of the café. Somebody would turn it on to the one record which was appropriate to dancing. "*There are smiles . . .*"

That one record! I can hear the song yet—outmoded even at that time, but the one she liked best to dance to. With the phonograph grinding out its tune, she would tap-dance for us, either on a cleared spot among the tables or perhaps on a table top. And we would watch—and dream.

Mademoiselle d'Or, a slender golden vision on a table top, laughing, tawny eyes glinting, skirts raised a little to allow her beautiful legs proper freedom, dainty feet tapping with the perfect rhythm of one born to dance. She would have been a sensation in Paris. In fact, I've sometimes suspected she had been a sensation there—before fate or whim drove her down here into North Africa to Hamam Meknes near the Isle of the Lotus Eaters. One lovely woman alone among men exiled here by business or the army—dancing her way into all our hearts. . . .

After her tap-dance she would dance with those of us she knew would not try to take liberties. She played no favorites; indeed she scarcely knew whose arms she danced in.

It was the dancing itself that intoxicated her. That was all. Born to dance, loving it, almost seeming to live for it.

And then she went mad—or womanly—and married Lakhdar.

ACHMED LAKHDAR was the Caid of Hamam Meknes. His house didn't look like much from the outside, and he himself always dressed in plain burnooses. But Lakhdar was a rich man. He could probably have laid his hands on a quarter of a million in cash had he needed it.

Lakhdar was up in Madrid when Mademoiselle d'Or first appeared among us. He was there for six months before coming back and meeting Mademoiselle d'Or.

The first day he met her he proposed marriage.

Lakhdar was handsome in his way. About forty, he was lean and supple, with a close-cropped black beard. He was suave and smooth-mannered, but even a woman should have seen the ruthlessness under the surface. His hawk nose and thin-lipped mouth indicated it. So did his eyes, tawny eyes much the color of Mademoiselle d'Or's, only cold as frozen amber where hers were warm and laughing.

We all tried to reason with her. But it seemed her money was running low.

Caid Lakhdar was rich, he loved her, he was reasonably good-looking, it would be romantic. . . .

Lakhdar's Renault town car came back from Tunis one day with the shades pulled tightly over the windows. In the body was Mademoiselle d'Or, now Lakhdar's wife.

Fourth wife of the Caid Lakhdar, immured in his house. . . .

These marriages of East and West! They can be made to look very romantic, but seldom do they work out that way. Sometimes an Arab petty potentate will have only the one wife, allow her a sort of half-freedom, may even permit her to retain her own religion. Even in these rare cases happiness seldom lasts long. And the Caid Lakhdar was far from being that sort of husband.

From the moment Mademoiselle d'Or disappeared into his home, she stayed in it as in a tomb. Now and then, rarely, we saw her. Always she was heavily chaperoned. We would never have known her, veiled and swathed in white, from other Arab women driven under surveillance to a secluded shop, had it not been for her feet. Those dainty, thistle-down feet, clad stubbornly in high-heeled shoes. The one feature of her individuality left. You couldn't mistake those.

And so we knew, when infrequently a small, shrouded figure with forlornly drooping shoulders hastened from closed car to dimly lit shop on lovely little feet in high-heeled slippers, that this was our Mademoiselle d'Or. Or her shell, perhaps! And we sighed and looked at each other, and ordered another cognac, which was drunk in silence.

The Café Penny—indeed the whole town of Hamam Meknes—was a bleak, grim place without our dancing, small companion. But if Mademoiselle d'Or was absent in the flesh, she was much with us in the spirit. All we could talk about was her probable happiness in Lakhdar's white-walled home, and what she was doing now to busy herself—and how she could live without her dancing and her gay comradeship with men.

Well, I had the answer to that, long afterward, from one of Lakhdar's houseboys in a gossiping moment.

She had no happiness in Lakhdar's house, she had nothing with which to busy herself—and she could not live without the dancing and the comradeship.

It went well for a few weeks, the boy said. Lakhdar was no fool. He knew the yearning of those trim small feet in their high-heeled shoes. When they came back from Tunis that day, he had a phonograph and some records in the car with them. Among the records was the one to whose dancing he had first seen Mademoiselle d'Or. *"There are smiles . . ."*

She danced for him, to that record.

I can see her, tawny eyes laughing, tawny hair tossing a little as her feet tapped out the tune, dressed probably in the gauzy harem garments whose main function is coolness rather than embellishment of sex—though the sex is not ignored.

She danced and danced. And Lakhdar, who had no rhythm in his heart or music in his soul, of course quickly tired of it. More, he began to be annoyed by it, so that Mademoiselle d'Or danced alone when her feet urged her past enduring, or danced not at all.

In Lakhdar's house, under Lakhdar's frozen amber eyes, she could not dance and had no one to talk to but the servants, and Lakhdar's three other wives, who were fat and stupid and hated her with a consuming hatred.

A short distance away was the Café Penny, where she could dance to ecstatic *bravos,* and later dance with men who treated her almost reverently and whose adoration must have been like wine to her

gay, starved soul. A short distance from Lakhdar's home to the Café Penny. And even an idiot should have foretold the result. . . .

But I was utterly unprepared for it when it came. For I had not then talked to the house-boy, and even in my most pessimistic moments had not dreamed the girl was so wildly unhappy.

All I knew was that, as I sat under the awning on the baked sidewalk at a Café Penny table, I looked down the narrow street and saw an Arab woman walking alone over the cobbles.

I STARED. Arab women, except of the lowest class, do not commonly walk, alone, along the streets. And this woman's *haik* was exceptionally fine, and she was small and daintily formed, as you could see in spite of the shapelessness of her garments.

And then I heard the French lieutenant sitting next to me gasp and sit very straight and incredulous in his chair. And I saw what he was looking at.

The woman's feet were very small, and were clad in high-heeled, European shoes.

We stared at those feet while the woman came up to the sidewalk tables. As we stared, so did the others—a dozen of them—seated there. And in unison, our eyes swept up her body and to the eyes showing over her veil.

Tawny, golden eyes. Laughing eyes, though now a certain desperation showed in them.

"My God!" I said.

The French lieutenant looked the other way, and spoke to her out of the corner of his mouth.

"*Mon Dieu!* You must not stand here, *Mam'selle*. Leaving the Caid Lakhdar's harem and coming to a café alone where a dozen men sit! Lakhdar will flay you alive!"

Mademoiselle d'Or just stood there. The Frenchman had been in North Africa for a long time. He knew the place well. And his face was white to the lips at the thing she had done. But Mademoiselle d'Or was mad—or womanly.

She came among the tables, and she unloosed her veil!

"I came to dance," she said. "I came to live again one of the afternoons that were mine before I——" She faltered and stopped.

Well, with her unloosing of the veil, the damage was done. Had she simply gone out alone, and walked away from the café with her veil still in place, Lakhdar's rage, though bound to be terrific, might have stayed within bounds. But this! Lowering her veil before a café full of men! Wife of a Caid!

We did what we could to cover the affair. We hustled her into the closed part of the café where we sat during the rare days when it rained, or the more frequent days when driving wind made of the narrow street outside an inferno of whirling dust.

"This is horrible," said the Frenchman. "It is a—nightmare! If Lakhdar ever discovers——"

In the back of the café, Mademoiselle d'Or laughed at us. Mad—or womanly. . . .

"Why do you look so terrified? Like frightened children instead of men. I know this is a very bad thing I am doing. But suppose I am caught? This is the Twentieth Century. Even an Arab husband can do no more than divorce me."

Her tawny eyes laughed at us. And what could we say in the face of such wilfulness? She should have known better, after living for weeks in the harem of that thin-lipped man with the frozen amber eyes. But she didn't seem to.

"Anyway," she said gayly, "I shall not be caught. Today he is in Tunis. So I shall dance and dance."

She got to a table top, helped by hands that, I think, trembled. I know mine did. She shook her tawny hair free and, like a child delivered from a dark prison, laughed and danced. To the tinny record: *"There are smiles . . ."*

There was no gayety, aside from the almost hysterical gayety of Mademoiselle d'Or. We stood close to the table, as if to ring her around against possible evil.

I can see her yet, dancing there in her incongruous Arab costume, tawny hair flying, small feet tapping madly to the beat of the outmoded song.

"Laugh!" she cried. "Sing the song with me as I dance! This is a celebration. Lakhdar is in Tunis and so for a rare few minutes I am free!"

It was just at that moment that I heard a strangled curse rip from the lips of the French lieutenant. At the same time Mademoiselle d'Or's dancing feet broke their rhythm and stopped. She stared toward the doorway with eyes no longer laughing.

I turned to look, too, knowing what I was going to see but still hoping my knowledge was wrong. . . .

In the doorway stood Achmed Lakhdar.

He was dressed in a light blue burnoose, with the hood hanging down his back. He stood easily in the doorway, with a little smile on his lips. There was no expression in the icy amber of his eyes. But I began to sweat as the full enormity of what those eyes saw swept over me. The wife of the Caid of Hamam Meknes, dancing on a table top in a café before a dozen men, with her veil down and her face fully exposed to profaning gazes!

Instinctively we crowded between Lakhdar and the table. He ignored us, and smiled at the girl, whose white face appeared over our heads.

"Come, *cherie,*" he said.

I felt the table tremble against me with the trembling of Mademoiselle d'Or's slender body.

"Come," he repeated.

Ruin for me, or for any of the others there, to try to oppose the man. The French govern Tunisia politically, but they are meticulous in refraining from meddling in the Arabs' personal affairs. And nothing could be more personal than this scene between a petty tyrant and his wife.

Ruin for any of us to try to interfere, but we all did.

"Don't go," an Italian trader next to me said in a low tone.

The French lieutenant seconded it. *"Nom de Dieu,* no!" he said. "Stay."

"I'll drive you to Tunis in my car," I said. "You can catch a Marseilles boat."

But she only shook her tawny head at us, while the Caid Lakhdar stood easily in the doorway, smiling.

She got off the table and started toward him. The group of us took a step after her.

"Gentlemen," said Lakhdar courteously, "twenty of my men wait in the street. Any trouble would result in a small war, after which, I think you would be executed by the French if you were left alive by my men."

Mademoiselle d'Or faced us. "Please," she said. "This will be all right."

She was gone before we quite knew what had happened. We rushed to the sidewalk in time to see Lakhdar's closed Renault whirl up the narrow, crooked street.

As far as any of us could tell, that was all there was to it. Lakhdar took his wife from the café and kept her thereafter more closely in his harem. In a few months it was rumored that Mademoiselle d'Or had gone to Paris, and from then on no one ever heard of her again. That was the rumor. We believed it mainly

because we wanted to believe it. But later, bit by bit, I got the whole grim story—a story that brings sweat to the palms of my hands even now as I write it, though many years and thousands of miles now separate me from Hamam Meknes.

Lakhdar took Mademoiselle d'Or home. He went with her to the big, secluded room where he met with his wives.

He dismissed the three wives who were waiting there, hating Mademoiselle d'Or and pleased with the trap their lord had set for her. He went to the phonograph that looked so out of place among the other furnishings, and put on its felt-covered disk the record, *Smiles*.

It was, again, a house-boy of Lakhdar's who told me this, looking a little sick as he recounted it.

"*There are smiles,*" the record ground out, "*that make you happy—there are smiles that make you blue . . .*"

Lakhdar stared at the girl.

"Dance for me," he said softly.

She stared back at him, fear and bewilderment on her face.

"I—I don't feel like dancing."

"Dance for me."

There was something in his voice that belied the expressionlessness of his cold amber eyes.

She danced for him, alone in the harem room. Her lovely small feet in their ridiculously inadequate but entrancing high-heeled slippers tapped out the tune. Tawny hair tossing, body swaying like thistle-down, she danced to the music as she had danced so often before. But now her face was white as the sand under the moon, and her tongue kept moistening her dry lips as she stared at those icy, expressionless eyes.

"You love dancing, don't you?" murmured Lakhdar, as the record whirred to a close and she stopped. "Those little feet of yours won't let you be still. And they lead you into places where a Caid's wife should not go."

He began to smile again. And at that smile, the house-boy, watching in peril of his life from a high grating, says Mademoiselle d'Or screamed a little.

She screamed again as Lakhdar raised his voice and a man came into the room in answer. The fellow was a big, burly Arab with bloody hands. He was a butcher from the local *souks*.

Lakhdar tore the veil from the girl's face. And at the look in his eyes then, she fainted. While she lay unconscious, at Lakhdar's command the big Arab butcher gagged her and bound her arms. He placed her on a table, binding her legs separately to rings in the table top in such a way that her feet hung over the edge. He drew a knife from under his stinking burnoose, put a bowl under her feet. . . .

The house-boy heard someone coming, then. He dropped from the grating to the yard and ran and hid.

"It was about a month later that I heard there was a new grave in the cemetery by the sea-wall," the house-boy said. "It was a nameless grave. A child of parents too poor to buy a headstone was buried there, I was told."

It was just at this time that Lakhdar gave out that rumor of Mademoiselle d'Or's going to Paris.

It was two weeks after the Paris rumor that we saw Lakhdar again.

Usually he went to the Arab café down the tortuous street, but this time he came to the Café Penny, and sat down at a sidewalk table, arranging the folds of his burnoose.

To a man we turned in our chairs so that our backs would be presented to him. None addressed him or glanced at him. We knew nothing then of the hellish

thing that had happened to the golden girl, like a golden butterfly, in his house. But we suspected that something to make a calloused Legionnaire shudder had gone on under Lakhdar's roof before he allowed her "to go to Paris," and we acted accordingly.

Lakhdar didn't even bother to smile. The opinions of Infidels were less than nothing to him. He simply sat indifferently at his table, sipping at the wine he had ordered.

Not looking at him, I was unprepared for the sound of his voice when it grated out:

"Allah!"

I turned in my chair to stare at him.

He had risen to his feet. His face was white with a maniac's rage. His eyes were blazing. He turned toward the service bar.

"What fool dares play that record—and dance to it?"

The French café owner dropped the glass he was polishing.

"Play what record?" he faltered. "And who is dancing?"

"Pig!" rasped Lakhdar, his nostrils quivering with mad wrath. "The song *she* danced to! Who started that in the machine? And who is dancing to it as *she* danced to it?"

"But no one," gasped the proprietor. "No one. I hear nothing——"

Lakhdar's curse crackled out. He strode to the rear of the café and looked around.

There was no one there. I could see that from where I was. Not a soul. But Lakhdar looked for a full minute, as though he doubted the evidence of his eyes.

Then he went to the phonograph. No sound was coming from it, of course. Had there been, we all could have heard. But there was a record lying on its disk, collecting dust because none of us cared to play it any more.

Lakhdar grasped the record. He raised it high and dashed it to the floor, shattering it to pieces.

I knew what the record was. *"There are smiles . . ."*

Caid Lakhdar stalked out of the café. And we looked after him, and then turned to stare at one another.

The song *she* danced to? Dancing as *she* had danced to it?

We looked at one another quite a long time, there at the Penny Café, with the floor behind us littered with the pieces of the record to the tune of which those small flying feet had twinkled so often.

A BRILLIANT young Arab physician, graduate of the Sorbonne, who had come to Hamam Meknes only a little before Mademoiselle d'Or's disappearance, and who knew nothing of the tale and cared less, supplied me with the next bit in the mosaic.

I went to his house with an infected hand, and while he bound the puffy, discolored cut, he talked. He talked of the Caid, which was unwise; but he wanted to impress me with the fact that he attended Lakhdar.

"I have attended him daily in the last week," he said. "Or, I should say, nightly. There is a curious case."

He frowned a little.

"The Caid seems unable to sleep. And I seem unable to make him—unless I give him morphine enough to kill a camel."

"Unable to sleep?" I repeated. "That is odd."

"Very," said the doctor. "But not so odd as the cause. He keeps thinking he hears somebody dancing. Tap-dancing, as they call it in English. He swears someone is dancing, and the sound keeps him from sleeping. He remains uncon-

vinced even when I show him there is no one in the room—or any of the rooms near by."

I felt a little chill touch my spine, and I did not look at the doctor. I didn't feel that I could trust my eyes.

"The first time I went to see him, to try to cure his sleeplessness, I thought he was right. I thought someone really was dancing. His fingers were tapping to a sort of tune, and his head was a little sideways as he listened. There was no expression on his face, but in his eyes I thought I could see that he did not like the dancing."

The doctor finished dressing my hand.

"It was the devil's own job getting him to sleep. Always he insisted someone was dancing near him. And once I even thought I heard faint music, so strong was his conviction."

"Music?" I said. "Could you recognize it?"

He smiled.

"When there was actually no music to be heard? No, my friend. Yet I thought I heard it. When I was a student and we wanted music late at night without noise, I would sharpen a splinter of soft wood and put it in my phonograph for a needle. This music that I thought I heard was like that. Like the ghost of a phonograph record."

"You must have heard it pretty plainly."

He shrugged. "No. I would not have thought of that phonograph trick at all if my patient had not seemed to think of it first. He got up, as I listened, and went to his own phonograph. There was a record on it. He took the record off and broke it over his knee. It was this that suggested the thought to me, you see? Mental suggestion can be a powerful thing," he added importantly, "as any good doctor knows."

I took out my wallet to pay him, but delayed counting the bills. I wanted to hear more.

"Has the Caid continued to hear this —this dancing?" I asked.

"He has said nothing more," the young doctor said, suddenly realizing that he was talking pretty freely about the man who could make or break him in Hamam Meknes.

THAT was all I could get out of him. But I talked one evening to a French olive buyer. . . .

"What," said the Frenchman, "has happened to the Caid Lakhdar?"

I shook my head. "I haven't seen him for weeks. Nor has anyone else. It seems he is keeping closely to his own house."

The French buyer nodded slowly.

"It was there I saw him, instead of at the Arab café where we often talk over the coming season's business. He looked bad."

I said nothing, and abruptly the Frenchman became more voluble.

"Looked bad? *Mon Dieu!* He looked like a very sick man. He acts like a man of seventy, and his hair is graying, and his hands and head shake constantly, as though he had palsy. But always as his head shakes, it keeps to one side and his eyes are far off and intent as if he listened to something."

"Did he tell you what he was listening to?" I asked, with a carelessness I was far from feeling.

The buyer scowled.

"He mumbled something about dancing feet, several times. Dancing feet. . . . And his fingers tapped as if he was keeping time to these dancing feet. And once he hummed part of one of your American tunes. Or English, I don't know which."

"What tune was that?"

He pursed his bearded lips and whistled a few bars. *"There are smiles . . ."*

"But the man is mad, I think," he went on, still scowling bewilderedly. "He asked me constantly to repeat what I had been saying. . . . Yet he seemed to hear things my ears could not hear. I suppose someone was dancing in a near room, and he heard—but I could not."

His eyes narrowed shrewdly, and he chuckled.

"In fact, *mon ami,* I *know* he is mad! I contracted for all his olive oil for the season at a price so low that I could hardly believe he understood—a price that will ruin him, for this year at least. I was astonished when he signed at that figure. Had it been anyone else, I would have raised my own price—I only used it as a basis for bargaining. But Lakhdar is a hard man, and it is a stroke of business my house will appreciate. He has his own olive presses, you know, and ships a very fair grade of oil. . . ."

I let him talk on, but I wasn't listening. I was remembering Lakhdar's rage in the café awhile before:

"What fool dares play that record . . . the song *she* danced to . . . dancing as *she* danced? . . ."

But the phonograph in the rear of the café had not been playing, and no one had been dancing.

How was it that he—and he alone—heard the dancing feet of the golden girl—who was said to have gone to Paris? . . .

"——Caid must indeed be a very sick man," I heard the voice of the buyer again.

He left the café then, leaving me to wonder . . . with that small chill stealing along my spine. . . .

THE scandal of Caid Lakhdar's death raised a very small tempest in a teapot composed of a very small bit of North Africa, when you contrast it with the great world happenings. But it certainly turned things upside down around Hamam Meknes.

The young doctor fled at night. If he hadn't he would have risked being sent to Devil's Island. For there was a charge that he had deliberately made a dope addict out of the Caid, perhaps to drain him of money.

"But I didn't!" he cried again and again. "I didn't! I gave him morphine. Much morphine. But it was to make him sleep. He could not sleep, I tell you, unless he had a huge dose. He said he heard dancing feet constantly, and that they kept him awake. What could I do?"

His accusers grimly pointed out the circumstances of the Caid's suicide.

"But it was madness that made him do it," pleaded the doctor. "It was not the drug. It was madness. Who but a madman constantly cries out that he hears feet dancing—when there are none around to dance?"

He could never have prevailed in court, so it was just as well that he fled to Somaliland. The ending of the Caid Lakhdar was too monstrous.

Le Temps, in Paris, gave an account of it as accurate as any; a fairly long account, considering the item was but local colonial news:

Achmed Lakhdar, Caid of Hamam Meknes, Tunisia, committed suicide this morning, a raving maniac.

For some weeks he had been ill, suffering from insomnia, according to the Arab physician who attended him, though it seems unlikely that insomnia alone could have been the cause of his illness and the ensuing madness.

This morning, after a sleepless night, the Caid rose from his bed, suddenly, screaming. He has had a delusion for some time that he could hear dancing feet, according to the Arab servant who told the story. It is alleged that the delusion went back to his marriage with a dancer of unknown origin, who left him after a few months of harem life. But regardless of where the delusion originated, it overpowered him.

Screaming and raving about the dancing feet that would not let him rest, the Caid wrenched a surgical knife from the kit of the Arab doctor, and ran into the next room. He barred the door against the attacks of the doctor, the servants, and

an American business man who represents a farm machinery corporation in Hamam Meknes.

It took many minutes before the door could be broken down. And by that time the Caid had killed himself with the knife.

It is alleged that the doctor in attendance will be charged with injudicious use of narcotics, and that the Caid's momentary insanity sprang from the use of morphine, to which the Caid had recently become addicted.

Yes, I was the American business man. I'd gone into the house to see about a machinery order the Caid had placed months before and refused to confirm since. I arrived just in time to see him run, screaming and biting his frothing lips, into the next room—not having been stopped by any servants at the door as I should have been, and not knowing the real extent of the man's illness.

Le Temps didn't print quite all the details of his death—because the reporter from Tunis didn't get them all. But those of us trying to break down that barred door and reach him got the details, all right! First audibly, and then visually.

"For the love of Allah!" we heard him shriek again and again behind the barred door. "I can't bear any more! Not any more! In Allah's name!"

Then his screams took a turn that made our blood run cold, and we heard him shriek:

"Stop that dancing! Stop it! *Stop it!*"

He sang crazily, with a harsh Arabic accent, the only English words he knew: *"There are smiles that make you happy . . ."*

We got the door down then, and saw him standing in the center of the room. The surgical knife he had snatched from the doctor's emergency kit was pressed to his chest. Blood was dripping from it, and the point was sinking deeper and deeper into his flesh under the pressure of his mad hand.

He gave it a final thrust as we leaped toward him. . . .

We of the Café Penny have never said anything about the manner of the Caid's death. Not even after we'd learned and pieced together the scattered facts I have related here. Of what use to say anything now that Lakhdar is dead and beyond reach of punishment? . . .

But *is* he beyond reach of punishment? I, for one, sometimes wonder. I sometimes think that the Caid Lakhdar, who could only sleep when he took enough morphine to "kill a camel", cannot sleep even now—that on the lid of his coffin in his grave by the sea-wall the dainty feet of Mademoiselle d'Or, the golden girl, will for ever be dancing.

"Madly he implored from Xexanoth one hour of that bygone autumn."

The Chain of Aforgomon

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

What strange obsession led John Milwarp to probe into his past lives? A striking and unforgettable tale

IT IS indeed strange that John Milwarp and his writings should have fallen so speedily into semi-oblivion. His books, treating of Oriental life in a somewhat flowery, romantic style, were popular a few months ago. But now, in spite of their range and penetration, their pervasive verbal sorcery, they are seldom mentioned; and they seem to have vanished unaccountably from the shelves of bookstores and libraries.

Even the mystery of Milwarp's death,

baffling to both law and science, has evoked but a passing interest, an excitement quickly lulled and forgotten.

I was well acquainted with Milwarp over a term of years. But my recollection of the man is becoming strangely blurred, like an image in a misted mirror. His dark, half-alien personality, his preoccupation with the occult, his immense knowledge of Eastern life and lore, are things I remember with such effort and vagueness as attends the recovery of a dream. Sometimes I almost doubt that he ever existed. It is as if the man, and all that pertains to him, were being erased from human record by some mysterious acceleration of the common process of obliteration.

In his will, he appointed me his executor. I have vainly tried to interest publishers in the novel he left among his papers: a novel surely not inferior to anything he ever wrote. They say that his vogue has passed. Now I am publishing as a magazine story the contents of the diary kept by Milwarp for a period preceding his demise.

Perhaps, for the open-minded, this diary will explain the enigma of his death. It would seem that the circumstances of that death are virtually forgotten, and I repeat them here as part of my endeavor to revive and perpetuate Milwarp's memory.

Milwarp had returned to his house in San Francisco after a long sojourn in Indo-China. We who knew him gathered that he had gone into places seldom visited by Occidentals. At the time of his demise he had just finished correcting the typescript of a novel which dealt with the more romantic and mysterious aspects of Burma.

On the morning of April 2nd, 1933, his housekeeper, a middle-aged woman, was startled by a glare of brilliant light which issued from the half-open door of Milwarp's study. It was as if the whole room were in flames. Horrified, the woman hastened to investigate. Entering the study, she saw her master sitting in an armchair at the table, wearing the rich, somber robes of Chinese brocade which he affected as a dressing-gown. He sat stiffly erect, a pen clutched unmoving in his fingers on the open pages of a manuscript volume. About him, in a sort of nimbus, glowed and flickered the strange light; and her only thought was that his garments were on fire.

She ran toward him, crying out a warning. At that moment the weird nimbus brightened intolerably, and the wan early dayshine, the electric bulbs that still burned to attest the night's labor, were alike blotted out. It seemed to the housekeeper that something had gone wrong with the room itself; for the walls and table vanished, and a great, luminous gulf opened before her; and on the verge of the gulf, in a seat that was not his cushioned armchair but a huge and rough-hewn seat of stone, she beheld her master stark and rigid. His heavy brocaded robes were gone, and about him, from head to foot, were blinding coils of pure white fire, in the form of linked chains. She could not endure the brilliance of the chains, and cowering back, she shielded her eyes with her hands. When she dared to look again, the weird glowing had faded, the room was as usual; and Milwarp's motionless figure was seated at the table in the posture of writing.

SHAKEN and terrified as she was, the woman found courage to approach her master. A hideous smell of burnt flesh arose from beneath his garments, which were wholly intact and without visible trace of fire. He was dead, his fingers clenched on the pen and his features frozen in a stare of tetanic agony. His neck and wrists were completely en-

circled by frightful burns that had charred them deeply. The coroner, in his examination, found that these burns, preserving an outline as of heavy links, were extended in long unbroken spirals around the arms and legs and torso. The burning was apparently the cause of Milwarp's death: it was as if iron chains, heated to incandescence, had been wrapped about him.

Small credit was given to the housekeeper's story of what she had seen. No one, however, could suggest an acceptable explanation of the bizarre mystery. There was, at the time, much aimless discussion; but, as I have hinted, people soon turned to other matters. The efforts made to solve the riddle were somewhat perfunctory. Chemists tried to determine the nature of a queer drug, in the form of a gray powder with pearly granules, to which use Milwarp had become addicted. But their tests merely revealed the presence of an alkaloid whose source and attributes were obscure to Western science.

Day by day, the whole incredible business lapsed from public attention; and those who had known Milwarp began to display the forgetfulness that was no less unaccountable than his weird doom. The housekeeper, who had held stedfastly in the beginning to her story, came at length to share the common dubiety. Her account, with repetition, became vague and contradictory; detail by detail, she seemed to forget the abnormal circumstances that she had witnessed with overwhelming horror.

The manuscript volume, in which Milwarp had apparently been writing at the time of death, was given into my charge with his other papers. It proved to be a diary, its last entry breaking off abruptly. Since reading the diary, I have hastened to transcribe it in my own hand, because, for some mysterious reason, the ink of the original is already fading and has become almost illegible in places.

The reader will note certain lacunæ, due to passages written in an alphabet which neither I nor any scholar of my acquaintance can transliterate. These passages seem to form an integral part of the narrative, and they occur mainly toward the end, as if the writer had turned more and more to a language remembered from his ancient avatar. To the same mental reversion one must attribute the singular dating, in which Milwarp, still employing English script, appears to pass from our contemporary notation to that of some premundane world.

I give hereunder the entire dairy, which begins with an undated footnote:

THIS book, unless I have been misinformed concerning the qualities of the drug *souvara,* will be the record of my former life in a lost cycle. I have had the drug in my possession for seven months, but fear has prevented me from using it. Now, by certain tokens, I perceive that the longing for knowledge will soon overcome the fear.

Ever since my earliest childhood I have been troubled by intimations, dim, unplaceable, that seemed to argue a forgotten existence. These intimations partook of the nature of feelings rather than ideas or images: they were like the wraiths of dead memories. In the background of my mind there has lurked a sentiment of formless, melanchody desire for some nameless beauty long perished out of time. And, coincidentally, I have been haunted by an equally formless dread, an apprehension as of some bygone but still imminent doom.

Such feelings have persisted, undiminished, throughout my youth and maturity, but nowhere have I found any clue to their causation. My travels in the mystic Orient, my delvings into occultism,

have merely convinced me that these shadowy intuitions pertain to some incarnation buried under the wreck of remotest cycles.

Many times, in my wanderings through Buddhistic lands, I had heard of the drug *souvara,* which is believed to restore, even for the uninitiate, the memory of other lives. And at last, after many vain efforts, I managed to procure a supply of the drug. The manner in which I obtained it is a tale sufficiently remarkable in itself, but of no special relevance here. So far—perhaps because of that apprehension which I have hinted—I have not dared to use the drug.

MARCH 9TH, 1933. This morning I took *souvara* for the first time, dissolving the proper amount in pure distilled water as I had been instructed to do. Afterward I leaned back easily in my chair, breathing with a slow, regular rhythm. I had no preconceived idea of the sensations that would mark the drug's initial effect, since these were said to vary prodigiously with the temperament of the users; but I composed myself to await them with tranquillity, after formulating clearly in my mind the purpose of the experiment.

For a while there was no change in my awareness. I noticed a slight quickening of the pulse, and modulated my breathing in conformity with this. Then, by slow degrees, I experienced a sharpening of visual perception. The Chinese rugs on the floor, the backs of the serried volumes in my bookcases, the very wood of chairs, table and shelves, began to exhibit new and unimagined colors. At the same time there were curious alterations of outline, every object seeming to extend itself in a hitherto unsuspected fashion. Following this, my surroundings became semi-transparent, like molded shapes of mist. I found that I could see through the marbled cover the illustrations in a volume of John Martin's edition of *Paradise Lost,* which lay before me on the table.

All this, I knew, was a mere extension of ordinary physical vision. It was only a prelude to those apperceptions of occult realms which I sought through *souvara.* Fixing my mind once more on the goal of the experiment, I became aware that the misty walls had vanished like a drawn arras. About me, like reflections in rippled water, dim sceneries wavered and shifted, erasing one another from instant to instant. I seemed to hear a vague but ever-present sound, more musical than the murmurs of air, water or fire, which was a property of the unknown element that environed me.

With a sense of troublous familiarity, I beheld the blurred unstable pictures which flowed past me upon this never-resting medium. Orient temples, flashing with sun-struck bronze and gold; the sharp, crowded gables and spires of medieval cities; tropic and northern forests; the costumes and physiognomies of the Levant, of Persia, of old Rome and Carthage, went by like blown, flying mirages. Each succeeding tableau belonged to a more ancient period than the one before it—and I knew that each was a scene from some former existence of my own.

Still tethered, as it were, to my present self, I reviewed these visible memories, which took on tri-dimensional depth and clarity. I saw myself as warrior and troubadour, as noble and merchant and mendicant. I trembled with dead fears, I thrilled with lost hopes and raptures, and was drawn by ties that death and Lethe had broken. Yet never did I fully identify myself with those other avatars: for I knew well that the memory I sought pertained to some incarnation of older epochs.

Still the fantasmagoria streamed on, and I turned giddy with vertigo ineffable before the vastness and diuturnity of the cycles of being. It seemed that I, the watcher, was lost in a gray land where the homeless ghosts of all dead ages went fleeing from oblivion to oblivion.

The walls of Nineveh, the columns and towers of unnamed cities, rose before me and were swept away. I saw the luxuriant plains that are now the Gobi desert. The sea-lost capitals of Atlantis were drawn to the light in unquenched glory. I gazed on lush and cloudy scenes from the first continents of Earth. Briefly I relived the beginnings of terrestrial man—and knew that the secret I would learn was ancienter even than these.

My visions faded into black voidness—and yet, in that void, through fathomless eons, it seemed that I existed still like a blind atom in the space between the worlds. About me was the darkness and repose of that night which antedated the Earth's creation. Time flowed backward with the silence of dreamless sleep. . . .

The illumination, when it came, was instant and complete. I stood in the full, fervid blaze of day amid royally towering blossoms in a deep garden, beyond whose lofty, vine-clad walls I heard the confused murmuring of the great city called Kalood. Above me, at their vernal zenith, were the four small suns that illumed the planet Hestan. Jewel-colored insects fluttered about me, lighting without fear on the rich habiliments of gold and black, enwrought with astronomic symbols, in which I was attired. Beside me was a dial-shaped altar of zoned agate, carved with the same symbols, which were those of the dreadful omnipotent time-god, Aforgomon, whom I served as a priest.

I had not even the slightest memory of myself as John Milwarp, and the long pageant of my terrestrial lives was as something that had never been—or was yet to be. Sorrow and desolation choked my heart as ashes fill some urn consecrated to the dead; and all the hues and perfumes of the garden about me were redolent only of the bitterness of death. Gazing darkly upon the altar, I muttered blasphemy against Aforgomon, who, in his inexorable course, had taken away my beloved and had sent no solace for my grief. Separately I cursed the signs upon the altar: the stars, the worlds, the suns, the moons, that meted and fulfilled the processes of time. Belthoris, my betrothed, had died at the end of the previous autumn: and so, with double maledictions, I cursed the stars and planets presiding over that season.

I became aware that a shadow had fallen beside my own on the altar, and knew that the dark sage and sorcerer Atmox had obeyed my summons. Fearfully but not without hope I turned toward him, noting first of all that he bore under his arm a heavy, sinister-looking volume with covers of black steel and hasps of adamant. Only when I had made sure of this did I lift my eyes to his face, which was little less somber and forbidding than the tome he carried.

"Greeting, O Calaspa," he said harshly. "I have come against my own will and judgment. The lore that you request is in this volume; and since you saved me in former years from the inquisitorial wrath of the time-god's priests, I cannot refuse to share it with you. But understand well that even I, who have called upon names that are dreadful to utter, and have evoked forbidden presences, shall never dare to assist you in this conjuration. Gladly would I help you to hold converse with the shadow of Belthoris, or to animate her still unwithered body and draw it forth from the tomb. But that which you purpose is another

matter. You alone must perform the ordained rites, must speak the necessary words: for the consequences of this thing will be direr than you deem."

"I care not for the consequences," I replied eagerly, "if it be possible to bring back the lost hours which I shared with Belthoris. Think you that I could content myself with her shadow, wandering thinly back from the Borderland? Or that I could take pleasure in the fair clay that the breath of necromancy has troubled and has made to arise and walk without mind or soul? Nay, the Belthoris I would summon is she on whom the shadow of death has never yet fallen!"

It seemed that Atmox, the master of doubtful arts, the vassal of umbrageous powers, recoiled and blenched before my vehement declaration.

"Bethink you," he said with minatory sterness, "that this thing will constitute a breach of the sacred logic of time and a blasphemy against Aforgomon, god of the minutes and the cycles. Moreover, there is little to be gained: for not in its entirety may you bring back the season of your love, but only one single hour, torn with infinite violence from its rightful period in time. . . . Refrain, I adjure you, and content yourself with a lesser sorcery."

"Give me the book," I demanded. "My service to Aforgomon is forfeit With due reverence and devotion I have worshipped the time-god, and have done in his honor the rites ordained from eternity; and for all this the god has betrayed me."

Then, in that high-climbing, luxuriant garden beneath the four suns, Atmox opened the adamantine clasps of the steel-bound volume; and, turning to a certain page, he laid the book reluctantly in my hands. The page, like its fellows, was of some unholy parchment streaked with musty discolorations and blackening at the margin with sheer antiquity; but upon it shone unquenchably the dread characters a primal archimage had written with an ink bright as the new-shod ichor of demons. Above this page I bent in my madness, conning it over and over till I was dazzled by the fiery runes; and, shutting my eyes, I saw them burn on a red darkness, still legible, and writhing like hellish worms.

Hollowly, like the sound of a far bell, I heard the voice of Atmox: "You have learned, O Calaspa, the unutterable name of that One whose assistance can alone restore the fled hours. And you have learned the incantation that will rouse that hidden power, and the sacrifice needed for its propitiation. Knowing these things, is your heart still strong and your purpose firm?"

The name I had read in the wizard volume was that of the chief cosmic power antagonistic to Aforgomon; the incantation and the required offering were those of a foul demonolatry. Nevertheless, I did not hesitate, but gave resolute affirmative answer to the somber query of Atmox.

PERCEIVING that I was inflexible, he bowed his head, trying no more to dissuade me. Then, as the flame-runed volume had bade me do, I defiled the altar of Aforgomon, blotting certain of its prime symbols with dust and spittle. While Atmox looked on in silence, I wounded my right arm to its deepest vein on the sharp-tipped gnomon of the dial; and, letting the blood drip from zone to zone, from orb to orb on the graven agate, I made unlawful sacrifice, and intoned aloud, in the name of the Lurking Chaos, Xexanoth, an abominable ritual composed by a backward repetition and jumbling of litanies sacred to the time-god.

Even as I chanted the incantation, it seemed that webs of shadow were woven

foully athwart the suns; and the ground shook a little, as if colossal demons trod the world's rim, striding stupendously from abysses beyond. The garden walls and trees wavered like a wind-blown reflection in a pool; and I grew faint with the loss of that life-blood I had poured out in demonolatrous offering. Then, in my flesh and in my brain, I felt the intolerable racking of a vibration like the long-drawn shock of cities riven by earthquake, and coasts crumbling before some chaotic sea; and my flesh was torn and harrowed, and my brain shuddered with the toneless discords sweeping through me from deep to deep.

I faltered, and confusion gnawed at my inmost being. Dimly I heard the prompting of Atmox, and dimmer still was the sound of my own voice that made answer to Xexanoth, naming the impious necromancy which was to be effected only through its power. Madly I implored from Xexanoth, in despite of time and its ordered seasons, one hour of that bygone autumn which I had shared with Belthoris; and imploring this, I named no special hour: for all, in memory, had seemed of an equal joy and gladness.

As the words ceased upon my lips, I thought that darkness fluttered in the air like a great wing; and the four suns went out, and my heart was stilled as if in death. Then the light returned, falling obliquely from suns mellow with full-tided autumn; and nowhere beside me was there any shadow of Atmox; and the altar of zoned agate was bloodless and undefiled. I, the lover of Belthoris, witting not of the doom and sorrow to come, stood happily with my beloved before the altar, and saw her young hands crown its ancient dial with the flowers we had plucked from the garden.

Dreadful beyond all fathoming are the mysteries of time. Even I, the priest and initiate, though wise in the secret doctrines of Aforgomon, know little enough of that elusive, ineluctable process whereby the present becomes the past and the future resolves itself into the present. All men have pondered the riddles of duration and transience; have wondered, vainly, to what bourn the lost days and the sped cycles are consigned. Some have dreamt that the past abides unchanged, becoming eternity as it slips from our mortal ken; and others have deemed that time is a stairway whose steps crumble one by one behind the climber, falling into a gulf of nothing.

Howsoever this may be, I know that she who stood beside me was the Belthoris on whom no shadow of mortality had yet descended. The hour was one new-born in a golden season; and the minutes to come were pregnant with all wonder and surprize belonging to the untried future.

Taller was my beloved than the frail, unbowed lilies of the garden. In her eyes was the sapphire of moonless evenings sown with small golden stars. Her lips were strangely curved, but only blitheness and joy had gone to their shaping. She and I had been betrothed from our childhood, and the time of the marriage-rites was now approaching. Our intercourse was wholly free, according to the custom of that world. Often she came to walk with me in my garden and to decorate the altar of that god whose revolving moons and suns would soon bring the season of our felicity.

The moths that flew about us, winged with aerial cloth-of-gold, were no lighter than our hearts. Making blithe holiday, we fanned our frolic mood to a high flame of rapture. We were akin to the full-hued, climbing flowers, the swift-darting insects, and our spirits blended and soared with the perfumes that were drawn skyward in the warm air. Unheard by us was the loud murmuring of

the mighty city of Kalood lying beyond my garden walls; for us the many-peopled planet known as Hestan no longer existed; and we dwelt alone in a universe of light, in a blossomed heaven. Exalted by love in the high harmony of those moments, we seemed to touch eternity; and even I, the priest of Aforgomon, forgot the blossom-fretting days, the system-devouring cycles.

In the sublime folly of passion, I swore then that death or discord could never mar the perfect communion of our hearts. After we had wreathed the altar, I sought the rarest, the most delectable flowers: frail-curving cups of wine-washed pearl, of moony azure and white with scrolled purple lips; and these I twined, between kisses and laughter, in the black maze of Belthoris' hair; saying that another shrine than that of time should receive its due offering.

Tenderly, with a lover's delay, I lingered over the wreathing; and, ere I had finished, there fluttered to the ground beside us a great, crimson-spotted moth whose wing had somehow been broken in its airy voyaging through the garden. And Beithoris, ever tender of heart and pitiful, turned from me and took up the moth in her hands; and some of the bright blossoms dropped from her hair unheeded. Tears welled from her deep blue eyes; and seeing that the moth was sorely hurt and would never fly again, she refused to be comforted; and no longer would she respond to my passionate wooing. I, who grieved less for the moth than she, was somewhat vexed; and between her sadness and my vexation, there grew between us some tiny, temporary rift. . . .

Then, ere love had mended the misunderstanding; then, while we stood before the dread altar of time with sundered hands, with eyes averted from each other, it seemed that a shroud of darkness descended upon the garden. I heard the crash and crumbling of shattered worlds, and a black flowing of ruinous things that went past me through the darkness. The dead leaves of winter were blown about me, and there was a falling of tears or rain. . . . Then the vernal suns came back, high-stationed in cruel splendor; and with them came the knowledge of all that had been, of Belthoris' death and my sorrow, and the madness that had led to forbidden sorcery. Vain now, like all other hours, was the resummoned hour; and doubly irredeemable was my loss. My blood dripped heavily on the dishallowed altar, my faintness grew deathly, and I saw through murky mist the face of Atmox beside me; and the face was like that of some comminatory demon. . . .

MARCH 13TH. I, John Milwarp, write this date and my name with an odd dubiety. My visionary experience under the drug *souvara* ended with that rilling of my blood on the symboled dial, that glimpse of the terror-distorted face of Atmox. All this was in another world, in a life removed from the present by births and deaths without number; and yet, it seems, not wholly have I returned from the twice-ancient past. Memories, broken but strangely vivid and living, press upon me from the existence of which my vision was a fragment; and portions of the lore of Hestan, and scraps of its history, and words from its lost language, arise unbidden in my mind.

Above all, my heart is still shadowed by the sorrow of Calaspa. His desperate necromancy, which would seem to others no more than a dream within a dream, is stamped as with fire on the black page of recollection. I know the awfulness of the god he had blasphemed; and the foulness of the demonolatry he had done, and the sense of guilt and despair under which

he swooned. It is *this* that I have striven all my life to remember, this which I have been doomed to re-experience. And I fear with a great fear the farther knowledge which a second experiment with the drug will reveal to me.

The next entry of Milwarp's diary begins with a strange dating in English script: "The second day of the moon Occalat, in the thousand-and-ninth year of the Red Eon." This dating, perhaps, is repeated in the language of Hestan: for, directly beneath it, a line of unknown ciphers is set apart. Several lines of the subsequent text are in the alien tongue; and then, as if by an unconscious reversion, Milwarp continues the diary in English. There is no reference to another experiment with *souvara;* but apparently such had been made, with a continued revival of his lost memories.

. . . What genius of the nadir gulf had tempted me to this thing and had caused me to overlook the consequences? Verily, when I called up for myself and Belthoris an hour of former autumn, with all that was attendant upon the hour, *that bygone interim was likewise evoked and repeated for the whole world Hestan, and the four suns of Hestan.* From the full midst of spring, all men had stepped backward into autumn, keeping only the memory of things prior to the hour thus resurrected, and knowing not the events future to the hour. But, returning to the present, they recalled with amazement the unnatural necromancy; and fear and bewilderment were upon them; and none could interpret the meaning.

For a brief period, the dead had lived again; the fallen leaves had returned to the bough; the heavenly bodies had stood at a long-abandoned station; the flower had gone back into the seed, the plant into the root. Then, with eternal disorder set among all its cycles, time had resumed its delayed course.

No movement of any cosmic body, no year or instant of the future, would be precisely as it should have been. The error and discrepancy I had wrought would bear fruit in ways innumerable. The suns would find themselves at fault; the worlds and atoms would go always a little astray from their appointed bourn.

It was of these matters that Atmox spoke, warning me, after he had stanched my bleeding wound. For he too, in that relumined hour, had gone back and had lived again through a past happening. For him the hour was one in which he had descended into the nether vaults of his house. There, standing in a many-pentacled circle, with burning of unholy incense and uttering of accurst formulæ, he had called upon a malign spirit from the bowels of Hestan and had questioned it concerning the future. But the spirit, black and voluminous as the fumes of pitch, refused to answer him directly and pressed furiously with its clawed members against the confines of the circle. It said only: "Thou hast summoned me at thy peril. Potent are the spells thou hast used, and strong is the circle to withstand me, and I am restrained by time and space from the wreaking of my anger upon thee. *But haply thou shalt summon me again, albeit in the same hour of the same autumn;* and in that summoning the laws of time shall be broken, and a rift shall be made in space; and through the rift, though with some delay and divagation, I will yet win to thee."

Saying no more, it prowled restlessly about the circle; and its eyes burned down upon Atmox like embers in a high-lifted sooty brazier; and ever and anon its fanged mouth was flattened on the spell-defended air. And in the end he could dismiss it only after a double repetition of the form of exorcism.

As he told me this tale in the garden, Atmox trembled; and his eyes searched the narrow shadows wrought by the high suns; and he seemed to listen for the noise of some evil thing that burrowed toward him beneath the earth.

FOURTH day of the moon Occalat. Stricken with terrors beyond those of Atmox, I kept apart in my mansion amid the city of Kalood. I was still weak with the loss of blood I had yielded to Xexanoth; my senses were full of strange shadows; my servitors, coming and going after me, were as phantoms, and scarcely I heeded the pale fear in their eyes or heard the dreadful things they whispered. . . . Madness and chaos, they told me, were abroad in Kalood; the divinity of Aforgomon was angered. All men thought that some baleful doom impended because of that unnatural confusion which had been wrought among the hours of time.

This afternoon they brought me the story of Atmox's death. In bated tones they told me how his neophytes had heard a roaring as of a loosed tempest in the chamber where he sat alone with his wizard volumes and paraphernalia. Above the roaring, for a little, human screams had sounded, together with a clashing as of hurled censers and braziers, a crashing as of overthrown tables and tomes. Blood rilled from under the shut door of the chamber, and, rilling, it took from instant to instant the form of dire ciphers that spelt an unspeakable name. After the noises had ceased, the neophytes waited a long while ere they dared to open the door. Entering at last, they saw the floor and the walls heavily bespattered with blood, and rags of the sorcerer's raiment mingled everywhere with the sheets of his torn volumes of magic, and the shreds and manglings of his flesh strewn amid broken furniture, and his brains daubed in a horrible paste on the high ceiling.

Hearing this tale, I knew that the earthly demon feared by Atmox had found him somehow and had wreaked its wrath upon him. In ways unguessable, it had reached him through the chasm made in ordered time and space by one hour repeated through necromancy. And because of that lawless chasm, the magician's power and lore had utterly failed to defend him from the demon. . . .

FIFTH day of the moon Occalat. Atmox, I am sure, had not betrayed me: for in so doing, he must have betrayed his own implicit share in my crime. . . . Howbeit, this evening the priests came to my house ere the setting of the westernmost sun: silent, grim, with eyes averted as if from a foulness innominable. Me, their fellow, they enjoined with loth gestures to accompany them. . . .

Thus they took me from my house and along the thoroughfares of Kalood toward the lowering suns. The streets were empty of all other passers, and it seemed that no man desired to meet or behold the blasphemer. . . .

Down the avenue of gnomon-shaped pillars, I was led to the portals of Aforgomon's fane: those awfully gaping portals arched in the likeness of some devouring chimera's mouth. . . .

SIXTH day of the moon Occalat. They had thrust me into an oubliette beneath the temple, dark, noisome and soundless except for the maddening, measured drip of water beside me. There I lay and knew not when the night passed and the morning came. Light was admitted only when my captors opened the iron door, coming to lead me before the tribunal. . . .

. . . Thus the priests condemned me,

speaking with one voice in whose dreadful volume the tones of all were indistinguishably blended. Then the aged high-priest Helpenor called aloud upon Aforgomon, offering himself as a mouthpiece to the god, and asking the god to pronounce through him the doom that was adequate for such enormities as those of which I had been judged guilty by my fellows.

Instantly, it seemed, the god descended into Helpenor; and the figure of the high-priest appeared to dilate prodigiously beneath his mufflings; and the accents that issued from his mouth were like thunders of the upper heaven:

"O Calaspa, thou hast set disorder amid all future hours and eons through this evil necromancy. Thereby, moreover, thou hast wrought thine own doom: fettered art thou for ever to the hour thus unlawfully repeated, apart from its due place in time. According to hieratic rule, thou shalt meet the death of the fiery chains: but deem not that this death is more than the symbol of thy true punishment. Thou shalt pass hereafter through other lives in Hestan, and shalt climb midway in the cycles of the world subsequent to Hestan in time and space. But through all thine incarnations the chaos thou hast invoked will attend thee, widening ever like a rift. And always, in all thy lives, the rift will bar thee from reunion with the soul of Belthoris; and always, though merely by an hour, thou shalt miss the love that should otherwise have been oftentimes regained.

"At last, when the chasm has widened overmuch, thy soul shall fare no farther in the onward cycles of incarnation. At that time it shall be given thee to remember clearly thine ancient sin; and remembering, thou shalt perish out of time. Upon the body of that latter life shall be found the charred imprint of the chains, as the final token of thy bondage. But they that knew thee will soon forget, and thou shalt belong wholly to the cycles limited for thee by thy sin."

MARCH 29TH. I write this date with infinite desperation, trying to convince myself that there is a John Milwarp who exists on Earth, in the Twentieth Century. For two days running, I have not taken the drug *souvara:* and yet I have returned twice to that oubliette of Aforgomon's temple, in which the priest Calaspa awaits his doom. Twice I have been immersed in its stagnant darkness, hearing the slow drip of water beside me, like a clepsydra that tells the black ages of the damned.

Even as I write this at my library table, it seems that an ancient midnight plucks at the lamp. The bookcases turn to walls of oozing, nighted stone. There is no longer a table . . . nor one who writes . . . and I breathe the noisome dankness of a dungeon lying unfathomed by any sun, in a lost world.

EIGHTEENTH day of the moon Occalat. Today, for the last time, they took me from my prison. Helpenor, together with three others, came and led me to the adytum of the god. Far beneath the outer temple we went, through spacious crypts unknown to the common worshippers. There was no word spoken, no glance exchanged between the others and me; and it seemed that they already regarded me as one cast out from time and claimed by oblivion.

We came ultimately to that sheer-falling gulf in which the spirit of Aforgomon is said to dwell. Lights, feeble and far-scattered, shone around it like stars on the rim of cosmic vastness, shedding no ray into the depths. There, in a seat of hewn stone overhanging the frightful verge, I was placed by the executioners; and a ponderous chain of black unrusted

metal, stapled in the solid rock, was wound about and about me, circling my naked body and separate limbs, from head to foot.

To this doom, others had been condemned for heresy or impiety . . . though never for a sin such as mine. After the chaining of the victim, he was left for a stated interim, to ponder his crime—and haply to confront the dark divinity of Aforgomon. At length, from the abyss into which his position forced him to peer, a light would dawn, and a bolt of strange flame would leap upward, striking the many-coiled chain about him and heating it instantly to the whiteness of candescent iron. The source and nature of the flame were mysterious, and many ascribed it to the god himself rather than to mortal agency. . . .

Even thus they have left me, and have gone away. Long since the burden of the massy links, cutting deeper and deeper into my flesh, has become an agony. I am dizzy from gazing downward into the abyss—and yet I cannot fall. Beneath, immeasurably beneath, at recurrent intervals, I hear a hollow and solemn sound. Perhaps it is the sigh of sunken waters . . . of cavern-straying winds . . . or the respiration of One that abides in the darkness, meting with his breath the slow minutes, the hours, the days, the ages. . . . My terror has become heavier than the chain, my vertigo is born of a twofold gulf. . . . . .

Eons have passed by and all the worlds have ebbed into nothingness, like wreckage borne on a chasm-falling stream, taking with them the lost face of Belthoris. I am poised above the gaping maw of the Shadow. . . . Somehow, in another world, an exile phantom has written these words . . . a phantom who must fade utterly from time and place, even as I, the doomed priest Calaspa. I cannot remember the name of the phantom.

Beneath me, in the black depths, there is an awful brightening. . . .

Disillusionment

By VICTORIA BEAUDIN JOHNSON

Slow moving, from the tomb of years,
  Unbidden shadows come to me;
I greet them with a hollow voice,
  Nor hide the tears that they must see.

We muse on all that might have been;
  Too well we know how strange it seems
That Age, the ghost of yesterday,
  Communes with shades of perished dreams.

You who have faith and youth and love,
  Can not discern this spectral host;
Too dazed with hope you can not see
  These shadows talking to a ghost.

"It was a bloody, staggering confusion of men and swords."

The Great Brain of Kaldar

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A superb tale of distant Kaldar, world of the great star Antares

1. *On a Far World*

THE sun that was shining in the sky was a colossal crimson sun, an incredible orb whose arc filled a third of the heavens. It was not the familiar yellow sun of earth but was the giant sun Antares, lying far across the starry universe from earth. Yet the man who stood on a terrace in its red blaze of light was an earthman.

Tall, lean, browned, dressed in a short tunic of woven black metal and wearing

a long sword at his side, Stuart Merrick looked thoughtfully at that huge rising sun. He turned abruptly as a girl came up to him, a slender feminine figure dressed like himself in the brief metal tunic.

Her dark eyes were alight in her finely chiseled, ruddy face as she greeted him, slipping her arm through his.

"You are not dreaming again of that far world from which you came, my Chan?"

Merrick smiled. "No, Narna. This world of Kaldar is my world, now." He motioned with his hand at the scene that lay before them in the crimson sunlight.

They stood on the terrace of a mighty pyramidal building of black metal, and before them stretched a great city of such pyramids. This black city was laced with gardens of blood-red vegetation and over it hummed sleek, shining air-boats, coming and going.

Miles out from the city's edge rose a stupendous wall of black metal mountains. And out beyond the enclosing mountain-wall, Merrick knew, stretched the crimson jungles that covered so much of this little-explored world of Kaldar.

The city before Merrick was *his* city, the city Corla of which he was Chan, or ruler. For Stuart Merrick, an adventurer whom a group of experimenting earth-scientists had projected across space to this distant world, had by his courage and the strength of his sword-arm won for himself the rulership of this race.

He, an earthman, ruler of a race on a world of Antares! It seemed unreal to Merrick even now. But the unreality of it vanished, as always, as he felt on his arm the warm fingers of his wife Narna, the Corlan girl whom he loved and had fought for and won.

She looked up at him now and said, "Here come Holk and Jurul. Everything must be ready for the start."

Two Corlan warriors were striding across the terrace, one a big, grizzled, bear-like figure, the other slender and wiry.

"The air-boat is ready, Chan Merrick," reported Holk, the bigger warrior, "but before we start on this trip north to visit the Dorta people, I wish you'd order one change made."

"What's that, Holk?" Merrick asked. "Is something the matter with the air-boat?"

"No, it's its captain," Holk replied. "I'd like you to replace Rogor with another captain before we start north."

"What's the matter with Rogor?" Merrick wanted to know. "He's one of the best flyers in Corla."

The big Holk nodded grimly. "Yes, and he's also one of your best enemies. He's been heard to say that it was shame we let ourselves be ruled by you, a man from another world."

"It is true, Chan," put in the quieter warrior, Jurul, "that Rogor has no love for you."

"But that doesn't say that he's disloyal," Merrick told them, laughing. "Forget your worries, and we'll get started."

As he and Narna walked after the two warriors to the air-boat waiting to take them on a trip north to the allied race of the Dortas, Merrick smiled at the girl. "Holk and Jurul see traitors everywhere," he told her.

Narna answered soberly, "They have reason to, my Chan. More than one in Corla still hates you because you are from a different world."

When they stepped up onto the deck of the long, torpedo-shaped air-boat, they were met by a keen-faced, athletic Corlan who wore the insignia of captain on his tunic. Merrick returned the man's salute with a little longer

scrutiny than usual, for this was Rogor, whom Holk distrusted.

"All is ready to start, Chan," Rogor reported. He hesitated a moment, and then added, "And I wish to thank you."

"To thank me? For what?" Merrick asked.

"For letting me retain command of your air-boat on this trip," Rogor answered. "I know that some people have whispered I was disloyal, and I have been anxious."

Merrick felt half ashamed that he had even listened to Holk's suspicions, as he met the man's frank eyes. "There is no doubt as to your loyalty, Rogor," he told the captain.

Quickly Rogor snapped orders to the crew, and as the propulsion-motors at the stern hummed loudly, the craft slanted up into the red sunlight. It circled high over Corla's sky-storming pyramids, then headed north. Soon it crossed the stupendous scarps and peaks and chasms of the black metal mountains that encircled the city. Ahead stretched a sea of crimson jungle, dense and unbroken as far as the eye could reach. Towering trees with scarlet foliage, weird, puffy moss-growths of immense size, hid the ground from sight. Merrick knew this great red jungle covered most of the world of Kaldar.

He wondered, as he had wondered many times before, what weird and alien things might not be wrapped in the concealing fastnesses of this mysterious jungle. He was gripped again by desire to explore the hidden secrets of this unexplored planet.

Night came down as the air-boat arrowed northward over the unending jungles. No sooner had Antares' blazing disk dipped behind the horizon than darkness was upon Kaldar.

Up from the east came a crimson, dull-glowing moon to light the night. It was one of Kaldar's five wonderful moons, four of which were red and one green. In their light as they rose, Merrick saw down in the dark jungle over which they were flying, glistening, moving things he knew were the terrible protoplasm-monsters that dwelled there.

At last Merrick retired to the small cabin assigned him and Narna. Holk and Jurul parted sleepily from him at the door of their own cabin. The helmsman still crouched watchfully at the wheel of the air-boat, back at the stern.

MERRICK's last sensation as he fell asleep was the sound of the wind humming outside the air-boat's cabin. When he awoke, he did not know how long he had slept, but his awakening was sudden.

It was a cry in Narna's voice that woke him. He strove to spring up, and discovered that he was bound hand and foot, his hands tied behind his back. He squirmed up into a sitting position and as he did so heard a mocking laugh.

The cabin was fully lighted, the air-boat still humming through the night. Across the cabin two of the crew were holding Narna. Holk and Jurul lay at the door, bound like himself. And over Merrick, staring triumphantly down into his face, stood Rogor.

"Well, Chan Merrick, do you not recognize your faithful servant?" asked Rogor mockingly.

Merrick's stupefied brain endeavored to comprehend. "Rogor, what does this mean?"

"It means," said Rogor coolly, "that I and the friends I picked for this craft's crew are no longer taking your orders."

Merrick saw the explanation. "By heaven, then, you *are* a traitor!"

"A traitor to you, the stranger from another world who usurped the rule of Corla, yes!" Rogor told him.

"A traitor, just as Holk said!" Merrick repeated, still hardly able to believe.

Then a sense of unutterable bitterness possessed him. "This is my fault, Holk," he said. "It wouldn't have happened if I had listened to you."

"It's the fault of that black-hearted wretch there whose neck I'll snap between by fingers when I get loose," Holk growled.

Merrick looked steadily at the traitor. "What are you going to do with us? You and your followers can't return to Corla."

"I don't expect to," Rogor told him calmly. "Did you ever hear of the great brain of Kaldar?"

Merrick's uncomprehending look was answer.

"I see you never did. Well, it is rumored there is a power, a being they call the great brain, in the northeast of Kaldar. We are now speeding in that direction. I am going to find this brain and ally myself with it and so will not need to return to Corla. Narna goes with me, both as an added revenge against you and because I find her beautiful.

"As for you and these two fools," Rogor continued, "we disembarrass ourselves of you here and now. It is simple —we merely toss you over the rail."

Merrick made a sudden tremendous effort to break his bonds. They held, and in a moment his cracking muscles relaxed.

"All right, take them out and heave them overside," Rogor coolly told his followers.

"Good-bye, Narna," said Merrick, his eyes steady on the girl's as the men picked him up.

"Good-bye, Chan Merrick, but if you die be sure that I will not be long behind," she told him steadily.

"A touching farewell, surely," Rogor observed. "Take them on out."

Merrick felt himself carried out of the cabin. The fresh rush of air in the darkness outside smote against his face. He and his friends were lifted up and their bodies were balanced on the deck-rail a moment as the men prepared to drop them over.

It couldn't be happening, Merrick told himself! He hadn't crossed the universe and fought all this world's perils to end in this way! He would wake up in a moment and he and the others would laugh at this dream. But even as he told himself this, the men gave a mighty heave and Merrick heard the wind scream past his ears as he plunged downward through the dark.

2. *Unseen Men*

MERRICK's fall was of short duration, for the air-boat apparently had been flying fairly low over the jungle at the moment they were tossed over. But it endured long enough for him to envision swiftly, as he streamed downward into the darkness, the stunning shock that would end all things for him when he struck.

He struck—a soft, deep mass into whose yielding substance he sank unharmed! He lay for a moment stupefied by the fact that he was still living and conscious. Then as he stirred his bound limbs he found that he lay upon a great mass of puffy fiber, and instantly realized that by sheer good fortune he had landed in the darkness upon one of the huge moss-growths, that had cushioned his fall.

He heard a choking utterance in a deep voice from close beside him in the dark. At once he remembered the two friends who had been tossed over the rail with him.

"Holk! Jurul!" he called into the darkness. "Are you all right?"

"Is that you, Chan Merrick?" came Holk's muffled voice. "I've got my

mouth full of this cursed stuff, but I'm all right, it seems."

"I too, Chan," came Jurul's quick voice. "But how comes it that we still live?"

"We were pitched over just right to fall on this moss-growth," Merrick told them. "It was one chance in a thousand."

He rolled over as he spoke and now could see a little point of light diminishing in the moonlit heavens northeastward.

"There goes the air-boat!" he exclaimed. "With Rogor commanding it and Narna in his power. If I'd only listened to you, Holk!" he added in bitter self-reproach.

"I'm more to blame than you, Chan Merrick," Holk growled, "for I thought Rogor a traitor but failed to watch him. But don't fear—wherever he's taking Narna, whether to that great brain he spoke of or elsewhere, we'll follow and find them."

"We can't follow far," cut in Jurul's quiet voice, "until your thick head finds some way to get us loose of these bonds."

"My thick——" Holk swore in the darkness. "When I do get loose, Jurul, the first thing I'll do is to teach you some respect for your betters.

"Roll over to my side, Chan Merrick," he continued, "and I'll try gnawing your bonds. I'll settle with Jurul later."

Merrick rolled across the soft moss until he bumped into Holk's prone form. By dint of much squirming and twisting he managed to bring his bound hands against Holk's face.

The big warrior at once began chewing on the bonds. The tough cords proved refractory, and Merrick heard him grumbling and growling as he ground them between his teeth.

Merrick, his eyes becoming slowly accustomed now to the dim moonlight of the glade in which they lay, was suddenly aware that the innumerable little noises of the small forms of life about them had ceased. A heavy silence had abruptly invaded this part of the jungle. The small flying and hopping things had apparently all deserted their vicinity, and Merrick wondered about this as Holk chewed on. Then a sound came to his ears that he had not heard before, a heavy, smooth, rustling sound.

"Holk, listen!" he said suddenly. "Does it sound to you like something coming?"

Holk paused. The rustling grew louder. "By the sun, it's one of the protoplasm-monsters!" the big warrior exclaimed. "The thing has sensed us and is coming toward us!"

Merrick's blood went cold. There were no creatures on Kaldar more feared by the Corlans than these mindless masses of protoplasm that glided through the jungles, engulfing all living things they met.

"Quick, let's roll away from the thing!" Jurul exclaimed.

"We could never escape it that way!" Merrick told him. "Go on chewing, Holk—our only chance is to get free of our bonds before the thing reaches us!"

Holk chewed desperately. The rustling sounds became louder and louder, and they heard small twigs and bushes cracking in the dark as the tide of mindless life rolled over them. Merrick, his heart hammering, watched the far edge of the moonlit glade in which they lay.

He saw in a few moments a little silver rivulet of what seemed glistening jelly flow out from the dark jungle into the glade. It grew wider, thicker, and other rivulets or arms of protoplasm emerge into the glade all along the edge. They merged, became a wave of protoplasm slowly rolling across the glade to the moss-growth on which the three bound humans lay. The wave thickened into a wall of protoplasm six feet high and thirty in width, the extent of its far-

ther mass unguessable, flowing smoothly out of the tangled vegetation.

Merrick, with Holk still chewing madly on his bonds, felt his hair stand on end as the incredible thing approached. No weapon could kill or even harm these mindless things—any wounds made in them simply flowed together again. Now from the huge mass a big glistening tentacle or pseudopod looped across the ground to the three men.

Merrick heard Holk shout at that moment and felt his hands free behind him. He fumbled frantically at the bonds on his feet. He untied them swiftly and was tearing at the cords on Holk's wrists when the great pseudopod swept around them. It strove to draw them back toward the central glistening mass, to be there smothered and ingested. But Merrick tore loose from the slimy grip and managed to loosen Holk's bonds.

Two more pseudopods looped around them as Holk scrambled to his feet. With a great effort they wrenched loose. Holk swiftly picked up Jurul's bound form and he and Merrick sprang away from the questing tentacles.

They threw themselves into a tangle of brush, and soon were out of hearing of the slow, unearthly monster. Then Holk unbound Jurul, who stood stiffly up.

MERRICK saw that the eastern sky was now paling and flushing red, the mighty circle of blazing Antares lifting above the horizon. He stood looking northeastward with fierce, haggard eyes.

"The air-boat was going northeastward when we last saw it," he said, "and Rogor said that in that direction lay his destination, the great brain of Kaldar."

"And what is that?" Holk wanted to know. "Cursed if I think there's a great brain or anything else in these benighted jungles!"

Jurul said, "I've heard talk in Corla, rumors about the mysterious, all-wise, all-powerful great brain. Sometimes it's spoken of as a brain, sometimes as a city, sometimes as a race of people. No one knows what fact lies behind the vague rumors—Rogor probably knew no more."

"Well, whether it's a brain or city or people, we're going to find it," Merrick said doggedly. "For there Narna will be."

"And there Rogor," Holk said grimly. "I'll get my hands yet around his pipe-stem of a throat."

"Rogor is mine when we find him," Merrick said with deadly emphasis. "But we'll not find him by waiting here. We know the direction, northeast, so we may as well start."

They started through the jungle without further discussion. The huge red sun was now lifting higher into the sky.

Through the hot hours of morning and early afternoon they pressed northeastward through the almost impenetrable tangle of the jungle. They encountered more of the fearsome protoplasm monsters but managed to evade the hideous creatures.

They had also to avoid other of Kaldar's weird forms of life, great flying things with leathery wings, creeping fungi, monstrous worm-creatures. The strain of meeting these and the fight through the red vegetation had wearied them. They had seen no sign yet that they were nearing their destination, or even that it had any existence. Then there came from close ahead the rustling, gliding sound they knew well, and at the same moment a human cry of panic.

"By the sun, it's one of those cursed protoplasm-monsters and it's got a human!" Holk cried.

"The only other humans in this part of Kaldar are Narna and Rogor and his followers!" Merrick cried excitedly. "Quick—come on!"

They raced ahead, emerged from the thicker vegetation into a fairly open grove of huge red-barked trees, and stopped at sight of an amazing scene. A protoplasm-monster of great size had thrown out the looping pseudopods that had apparently grasped its prey. From inside the coiling pseudopods came the human victim's call for help. But the person or being in the pseudopods' grip was absolutely invisible! They could see the tentacles curling around a solid form, could hear the human's agonized shouts, but could not see him!

"By the sun, we've gone crazy!" Holk exclaimed. "There's a man in the grip of those tentacles but he can't be seen!"

"An invisible man? Impossible!" cried Jurul.

The pseudopods looped tighter and another choking scream came to their ears.

"Invisible or not, it *is* a man in that thing's grip!" Merrick cried. "And we're going to save him!"

He rushed forward, Holk and Jurul close behind him.

THEIR heavy clubs crashed through the jelly-like tentacles and momentarily severed them. Unhurt, the protoplasm quickly flowed together again, but in the meantime Merrick was pawing the ground in search of the invisible victim the tentacles had held.

His hands encountered the warm body of a man. The body was absolutely invisible to Merrick but was solid and real as his own. While Holk and Jurul rained blows on the looping pseudopods, he picked up the body he could not see.

He yelled then for Holk and Jurul to flee, and they sprang for the thicker vegetation. The monster's reformed tentacles flowed after them, but they ran on until they were out of danger, and then Merrick laid down his invisible burden.

Merrick felt the man. He was living, stirring feebly. His body, to the touch, was quite tangible and real, and he wore a tunic and sword. Yet he was completely unseeable by their eyes.

"An invisible man!" Holk exclaimed, thunderstruck. "By the sun, it's unbelievable!"

"It's real enough," Merrick said, "though I admit that I too can hardly believe in this man's existence."

"Why, no one has ever dreamed of such a thing being possible on Kaldar! A man you can not see!" Jurul said, marveling.

Merrick felt the unseen man stir more strongly under his hands. "He's coming round," he said. "I don't think he's badly——"

He was interrupted by a sharp cry from Holk, a rush of feet and scuffle of bodies. He looked up bewilderedly to see Holk and Jurul apparently fighting frenziedly with the empty air. They were striking out fiercely, their fists stopping in mid-air as though encountering solidity of some sort.

Then Merrick felt himself gripped by hands. He could see no one at all about him, but he and Holk and Jurul were rapidly being overcome and held helpless. Out of the air came many voices and the sound of many feet, and Merrick was aware that they were being attacked and overwhelmed by a throng of unseen men.

3. The City of Invisibility

MERRICK ceased his useless struggles in a moment. Not only was it evident that he could not free himself of his unseen captors, but his first frenzy of panic at being assailed by beings he could not see was passing. It was now apparent to him that the invisible men around him must simply be others like the invisible man they had just rescued.

He squirmed in the unseen grip and saw that Holk and Jurul too were held helpless. They presented a weird spectacle, their bodies half upright in a strained, twisted position, apparently without support. Holk's face was crimson with rage and with the efforts he had made to free himself.

"Holk, it's no use struggling any more now," Merrick called to him. "They've got us for the time."

"Curse them, if I could only see them I'd be able to wring the necks of a few!" the big warrior panted. "I can fight anything I can see, but when it comes to phantoms——"

"They're not phantoms, they're simply other invisible men like the one we just saved," Merrick said. "Listen, do you hear them talking?"

The invisible men around them were now conversing excitedly. Merrick could understand what they were saying, for they spoke the language used by all races on Kaldar, human and unhuman. He gathered that they were helping up the invisible man they had saved from the protoplasm-monster, and asking him if he was hurt. He assured them he was not, and then Merrick heard him approach.

The invisible man spoke to Merrick, his voice seeming to issue from the empty air but a few inches away.

"I am Durklun, son of Nath, co-ruler of the Talas," he said. "Why did you three save me from the protoplasm-monster?"

Merrick answered into nothingness. "Simply because it was evident you were a man, though an invisible one, and needed help."

The invisible Durklun's voice sounded puzzled. "But why should you save one of us Talas? Are you not men of the great brain?"

Merrick shook his head. "We never heard of the great brain until a few hours ago, though we are now searching for it."

Another invisible man spoke. "Do not trust them, Durklun," he advised. "They are visible men, and the only visible men are the creatures of the brain."

"They do not speak or look like men of the brain, Zur," answered Durklun's voice. "But there is a way in which we can soon find out. I will examine their skulls."

Merrick suddenly felt the hair on the back of his skull parted, invisible fingers searching and feeling his cranium.

Then he saw Holk and Jurul similarly examined by the invisible man. Holk swore at the indignity.

Then came the bodiless voice of Durklun. "They are *not* men of the brain! Their skulls are without mark or scar! Release them!"

The unseen hands let go of Merrick and Holk and Jurul.

The invisible Durklun again spoke to Merrick. "For this rough treatment I apologize," he said. "I became separated from the rest of my hunting-party, and was attacked by that monster. When Zur and my followers found you with me they thought you men of the brain. But you are not men of the brain, and neither are you of our race of Talas, since you are visible. Of what race then can you be?"

"We are of Corla, a powerful race of humans far to the south," Merrick told him. "I am Merrick, Chan of Corla, and these are two of my warriors. We three were cast from our air-boat by a traitor, but chance saved our lives. This traitor abducted my wife and claimed he was going to ally himself to the great brain of Kaldar; so we have been following to locate the brain and find my wife and her abductor."

Durklun's voice held wonder. "We Talas never dreamed that there were any

other humans than us, except the men of the brain!"

"But are you really human?" Merrick asked. "None of us ever imagined that human beings could exist who were invisible."

"All of the Talas are invisible, yet human," Durklun told him. "Long ago the wise men of our race discovered a method of making matter invisible. To protect us from our enemies, they used this process on all our race and made them all invisible. We are born invisible, of invisible parents. Our bodies are completely transparent to light, and that is why you can not see us. But we ourselves see by other vibrations than light, and so we can see each other and also can see you and everything else."

Holk swore his amazement. "A whole invisible people! Who'd have believed it if we hadn't seen it?"

"Ask them about the great brain, Chan Merrick," put in Jurul.

Merrick nodded, turned back to the invisible Durklun. "The rumored great brain of Kaldar really exists, then?" he said.

"We know well that it exists," Durklun answered, "for the great brain is the most deadly enemy which we Talas have."

"That is why," put in the unseen Zur, "we thought when we first saw you that you were more men the brain had sent against us."

"How far is it from here to the brain's place?" Merrick asked eagerly. "We must get there as soon as possible."

"The city of the brain is but a day's march beyond our own city," Durklun replied, "but you must not go there. The humans who fall into the power of the brain meet a fate whose horror you can not yet imagine."

"I've encountered terrors before and survived," Merrick said grimly. "My wife is there, and there I'm going."

"At least," Durklun urged, "come with us to our city and get weapons and information to aid you in your quest."

Merrick hesitated. Every fiber in his body urged him to waste no time in following Rogor and Narna, but he saw the force of the invisible man's suggestion.

"All right, we'll do it," he told Durklun. "But we stay at the city of the Talas only long enough to learn what we can."

"That is well," Durklun said, "though if you were wise you would give up your hopeless quest altogether, since to approach the brain's mysterious city is to court an end much worse than death."

DURKLUN gave an order and Merrick heard the invisible men group themselves in obedience to it in a column. Some of the Talas linked hands with Merrick and Holk and Jurul, and they started thus through the jungles.

For two hours they and their invisible companions pushed through the vegetation. Then they emerged onto a sandy plain. The red light of blazing Antares poured down on the red sands, lighting the barren, lifeless expanse.

"There before us lies the city of the Talas," Durklun said.

Merrick and Holk and Jurul stared at the empty plain. "But there's nothing there!" Merrick protested.

He heard Durklun and Zur and the others laugh. "That is because you can not see it," Durklun told him. "The city of the Talas is as invisible as the Talas themselves."

"What?" exclaimed Holk. "You mean that all your buildings and everything else are invisible too?"

"Of course," Durklun replied. "They were made so by the same process used on the bodies of our people. Before you lie the great wall and gates and towers of the city of the Talas, but you can not see them nor the throngs within nor the in-

visible things they use. Neither could any enemy see them or even locate them by sight. That is why we live safely here, since the men of the brain who search for us can not find our city."

He led the way forward onto the plain. As they went on they heard from ahead the dim, confused sounds of a large city. Yet to the eyes of Merrick and his two comrades nothing was in sight but the red sunlight streaming down on the empty plain.

They stopped, and Durklun called out. A voice answered from high above and great hinges grated as a huge, invisible gate opened.

They passed through, and Merrick, extending his hand, could feel that they had come through an unseen wall of great thickness. They heard the invisible gate swinging slowly shut behind them.

Durklun led them onward, their feet now on a hard stone-like paving they could not see, a foot or more above the plain. It was as though they had entered into a weird city of phantoms. On all sides of them they heard voices, footsteps, people hurrying to and fro. Laughs, chatter, shouts, the sound of moving vehicles and the cries of invisible domestic animals assailed their ears.

Holk's face was a mask of astonishment, and Merrick felt hardly less overwhelmed as they went on. For all this babel of noise came from the empty air. To all appearances, he and Holk and Jurul were simply walking alone over the sunlit, barren plain!

Durklun led them into an invisible building, up a stair. They seemed climbing into the sheer air as they mounted the unseen steps. Their invisible host showed them into a room, which by feeling around they discovered to be of some size. They found unseeable chairs and couches, sat down upon them. Servants, unseen by their eyes, came to tend their wants.

Holk swore long and loud in his amazement. Jurul looked about him continually with undiminishing wonder in his eyes. So did Merrick, for to all appearances they three were sitting in the air twenty feet above the sandy plain, no one else in sight.

They bathed in an invisible tank in which the water was as unseen as everything else. The phantom servants brought fresh tunics for them, but when Holk tried his on, Jurul and Merrick shouted with laughter. The tunic was invisible like all else and Holk might as well have been wearing nothing. They resumed their own travel-stained tunics.

DURKLUN came then and conducted them into the lower part of the building where his father Nath, one of the co-rulers of the weird city of the Talas, with Zur and other invisible men awaited them. They were led to an invisible table and sat upon unseen chairs to eat.

Here new difficulties awaited them. The food and dishes before them were as invisible as everything else. The animals and even the plants of this city were also unseen. They had to feel for the food and place it cautiously in their mouths.

It seemed much like an imaginary banquet to Merrick and his comrades, but the food was solid and satisfying enough. Yet throughout the meal Merrick chafed with impatience, and before they had finished he was asking Nath concerning the great brain.

He heard Nath utter a sigh at his question. "My son has told me of your quest, but I had hoped you would forego this mad venture to the great brain's city," the Tala ruler said.

"My wife is there and I must go," Merrick told him. "Surely there is a

chance to get into the place and out again with her."

"You do not know of the immense powers of the great brain or you would not think so," Nath told him.

"Just what are those powers—what is the great brain?" Merrick asked. "I have heard that it is sometimes referred to as a brain, sometimes as a city, sometimes as a people."

"It is all three," Nath answered. "It is a brain, and it is also a city and a people.

"Long ages ago there were in this region two cities of humans, people very much like yourselves. One of those races was a highly civilized one that had developed great powers and knowledge through their co-operative form of society. In that city co-operation for the good of all was the supreme aim.

"It came to mean so much to them that they dreamed of their whole race having but a single mind. That, they thought, would make them finally and supremely co-operative, a single being with thousands of bodies rather than a race. They decided to use their scientific powers to bring about that end.

"They took, one by one, the brains out of their citizens and combined them into one great brain of immense size. This huge brain had an artificial environment in which it could live almost for ever, and it had mechanisms that broadcast its thought-commands by electrical vibrations to its thousands of people.

"Those people had installed in their skulls, instead of the brains that had been removed, a compact apparatus for reception and transmission of nerve-messages as electrical vibrations. When any of them saw or heard or sensed anything, it was relayed through that apparatus to the great brain, which saw and heard.

"In the same way, when the brain sent forth a thought-command to any one of its thousands of subject bodies, that body instantly obeyed. That single great brain, that single mighty intelligence, actuated every movement of every one of that city's thousands of people. The great brain was really the city's only inhabitant, and the throngs of people in it were but the mindless limbs of the brain!

"That happened," Nath continued, "long ago. Since then the great brain has dwelt in its city near here, its thousands of brain-men and brain-women moving like mindless puppets in answer to its commands. And from the first it has taken any humans it could find and made more puppets of them, removing their brains to add to its own single huge intelligence, and making them its mechanical slaves.

"It sent forth its brain-men to take prisoners from the other city of humans. The people of that other city finally resorted to invisibility to protect themselves. So did the ancestors of us Talas make themselves and their city invisible. Yet despite this the brain has remained our most dreaded enemy."

Merrick thought. "Rogor, the traitor who abducted my wife," he said, "was going to ally himself to the great brain. How would the brain receive them, do you think?"

Nath laughed shortly. "That mighty brain take for ally a single puny man? Of course it wouldn't. It would simply have their brains removed for addition to its own, and make them slaves also."

Holk uttered an exclamation. "Narna! If that were done——"

"It's what I'm thinking," said Merrick levelly.

He rose to his feet. "We must go, though we thank you for your help. If you'll direct us to the city of the brain and lend us weapons, we'll lose no more time."

"We'll do more than direct you!" Durklun exclaimed. "Ill go with you to the city of the brain!"

"And I too!" Zur added quickly.

"But we can't let you risk yourselves for us," Merrick was saying, when Nath stopped him.

"Of course you can—my son will be but repaying the debt he owes you of his life. And he and Zur can do much to help you get into the brain's city unobserved."

"By the sun, that's right, Chan Merrick!" Holk said eagerly. "If these invisible men can't get us in, no one can!"

"Very well," Merrick said. "We can start at once?"

"As soon as you have been provided with weapons," Durklun said.

The weapons when brought proved to be long swords and short daggers. They were invisible, like all else in the phantom city.

Holk swung his invisible sword around, making the air whistle. He turned in delight.

"Just let me get within reach of Rogor with this! He'll never know what killed him!"

"For what you've done to aid us, we thank you," Merrick told Nath. "If we come back, we'll try to thank you more fully."

Durklun and Zur led the way down into the street of the invisible city. Even in the fever of purpose that filled Merrick he could not be indifferent to the wonder of the place as they again traversed its unseen, thronging, noisy ways.

Again a great unseen gate opened to let them out, and at the edge of the jungle Merrick and his companions stopped, looking back. Antares was now setting, and in its last rays the plain seemed as empty and lifeless as a desert, the towering and busy city on it completely invisible. Then Durklun uttered a brief word and they plunged into the darkening jungles with their invisible comrades toward the mysterious and dreaded city of the brain.

4. *Creatures of the Brain*

"THE city of the great brain!" whispered the voice of Durklun. "See —down there!"

"Keep low!" he warned as Merrick raised his head above the ridge behind which they crouched. "You must not be seen."

Merrick, Holk and Jurul shouldering him on one side and Durklun's invisible form on the other, peered down through the night, his heart beating rapidly. Two red moons and the green one were now in the sky, and by their light he made out a large city whose towers and streets and structures were of gray stone.

The city was circular in outline. There were lights here and there along its ways, and a few people clad in white tunics going to and fro in its thoroughfares. Mostly it seemed silent, sleeping. At the city's center reared a gray tower far larger and higher than any other.

For hours that night Merrick and Holk and Jurul had pushed through the jungle with their two guides. It was hard work keeping up to the two Talas, for Zur and Durklun being invisible had to keep within touch of them at all times. Merrick had chafed at the difficulties of their progress now that he felt Narna within reach.

They had passed gliding protoplasm-monsters and other dangers of the jungles unscathed. Durklun and Zur had become ever more careful as they neared their destination, and their excessive caution was evidence of the dangers attending this venture. They had crawled forward on hands and knees to this ridge from behind which they now looked down at the moonlit city of the brain.

"I have never before seen this city," Durklun whispered, "but a Tala who escaped it some time ago told our people something about it.

"That great tower at the city's center contains in its inmost recesses the chamber of the great brain. The tower is strongly guarded for that reason. Prisoners are taken to the tower, and sooner or later their brains are removed, and the vibration-receiving apparatus put in their place. The brains are set aside to be treated before being added to the great brain itself. The Tala who escaped did so just before his brain was to be removed."

"Then it's likely that we'll find Rogor and Narna in the tower somewhere?" Merrick said.

"Yes," Durklun replied, "but I will not disguise from you my belief that even if we penetrate the tower we have but little chance of getting out with the prisoner you seek."

"Never mind that; we'll take our chance," Merrick told him. "Just let me get within reach of Narna."

"And me within reach of Rogor," Holk threatened.

Merrick turned to him. "Holk, our first purpose is to get Narna. If we must, we will let Rogor go to accomplish that."

"Oh, very well," Holk grumbled, "though he'd better not get within reach of this invisible sword of mine."

Jurul laughed quietly in the dark. "What a fencing-bout you and I could have with these blades, Holk!"

"Zur and I," said Durklun, "will go ahead and see if it is practicable for you to enter the city now. Wait here."

The two Talas slipped away, unseen as ever, and Merrick and his comrades waited impatiently. Then in a little while there was the soft sound of a step, and the voice of Durklun again issued from the air near them.

"We will try it," the Tala whispered. "There are few brain-men abroad, for most of them sleep at night like any other humans, their bodies needing rest. Only guards or those the brain has business for are awake now in the city."

Merrick kept hold of the invisible man's arm as they went over the ridge and crept down toward the city. He had his invisible sword tightly gripped in his other hand, and his pulse pounded with excitement as they approached the gray outer buildings of the silent city.

Holk and Jurul were close beside him, Zur going a little ahead. Merrick wondered if the moons of Kaldar had ever looked down on a stranger sight than this little group of visible and invisible men stealing through the night toward the city of the brain.

The city had no wall, the edge of the gray stone paving forming its boundary. They stepped onto it, started along a street leading inward. They kept to one side of the street, where the shadows were darkest.

They crossed other streets, and far along them could see figures moving under the lights. Then there was a warning hiss from Zur, and Durklun dragged them quickly into the deeper shadow of a crevice between buildings as men turned into the street a little ahead.

There were four of them, dressed in white tunics and carrying tools. They walked stiffly, mechanically, and Merrick felt his skin creep at sight of their faces. They were not human-looking faces at all, but changeless masks, the eyes fixed and staring. The men walked by the place where they crouched.

Durklun whispered them to go on, and they followed his lead once more. They soon turned into a street that was narrower and less well-lit. The big central gray tower loomed up at its end, and Merrick's pulse quickened.

Again they had to take to the shadows

as a man and woman approached, stalked silently by. Behind them came two men who wore swords and were obviously guards. They looked stiffly to right and left as they passed but did not discern the group crouched in the shadow.

MERRICK was now feeling all the horror of this great city, in which there was but one brain, one mind, actuating all these thousands of bodies. The city had really but one inhabitant—the great brain that brooded somewhere deep in the tower. All these people were merely its body's parts, limbs and sense-organs serving it as a man's senses and limbs serve him.

Now they were creeping through the shadows toward the tower's mighty pile, and Merrick saw with sinking heart in the moonlight that there were a half-dozen guards at the nearest door.

Durklun stopped them and whispered close in Merrick's ear. "Be ready to go through that door when the guards leave it. Zur and I will try to get them away long enough."

"But how——" Merrick began, then was silent as the invisible man slipped out of his grasp.

He communicated what the Tala had said to Holk and Jurul, and they crouched in the dark waiting for an opportunity.

In a few moments they heard a scratching sound at the tower's wall some distance from the door. The guards heard it too, or rather the great brain who used their ears heard it. They looked stiffly in that direction.

The scratching was repeated. The brain apparently decided to investigate, for the guards quickly drew their swords and started along the wall to the spot whence came the sounds.

Instantly Merrick and his two companions slipped across the moonlit paving and through the door. They found themselves in an almost dark corridor and waited there, swords in their hands. They heard the guards come back and take up their places outside the door again, having evidently found nothing. Then a few moments later someone brushed against Merrick's side and he started.

"It's Zur and I," Durklun whispered. "We had only to walk right between the guards, ourselves."

"By heaven, if we were all invisible, this task would be easy!" Merrick whispered.

"The hardest part is to come," Durklun told him. "We must find the cells where your wife and the others are prisoned, and they will be well inside the tower's mass."

They started along the corridor, Zur again going ahead to give warning if need be. Soon they turned into another corridor. It was dimly lit, and in rooms on either side of it Merrick glimpsed the sleeping forms of men and women—puppets of the brain, resting as a man might allow a tired limb to rest.

Continually they halted while Durklun and Zur investigated the corridors ahead. Merrick was becoming anxious, for he knew that dawn was not far distant, when the city would be crowded with the brain's mindless hordes.

They came to a door watched by guards. Again Durklun and Zur lured them away long enough to permit Merrick and Holk and Jurul to pass through.

"Why don't you simply steal up on these guards and cut them down?" Holk whispered to the invisible Durklun when the two Talas rejoined them, and Zur had again gone ahead to reconnoiter.

"That would mean instant discovery," the Tala said. "Don't you understand?—the brain would know at once if any of its bodies were killed, just as you'd know if

some of your fingers were cut off. We'd never get out of here."

Zur came back, and there was excitement in his whisper. "I have found the cells of the prisoners," he exclaimed. "And in one cell are a man and woman like you."

Merrick's heart bounded. "It must be Rogor and Narna!"

He was leaping forward when Durklun halted him.

"Careful!" the invisible man warned. "We mustn't be discovered now when we've almost succeeded."

They followed Zur around two turns into another dim-lit corridor. Along it were the cage-like metal doors of cells, and inside those they passed could be seen the forms of sleeping men.

Merrick thought he recognized some of Rogor's followers. Then Zur paused at another door. Merrick, gazing in with heart hammering, made out in it the athletic form of Rogor and the slim figure of Narna, stretched in sleep on opposite sides of the cell.

Merrick ripped the cell-door open. There was no lock or bar on it, a circumstance whose significance he was too excited to comprehend. He sprang inside, invisible sword in his hand and the others behind him, and instantly Rogor and Narna leaped to their feet.

Rogor rushed forward, but with a single deadly thrust of the unseen blade Merrick transfixed his heart.

"The death your treachery deserves, Rogor!" he hissed as the traitor Corlan sank to the floor.

Then he turned, breathless, and clasped Narna in his arms. For a moment he held her close.

"Narna, I've found you!" he exclaimed in a passionate whisper. "And we'll get out of here with you now!"

He stepped back a little and in that moment Narna struck him in the face with all her force!

She darted past the stupefied Merrick to the cell's open door, but Holk grasped her. She fought him furiously, and Merrick saw that her face was cold, stiff, unhuman, her eyes fixed and staring.

"Narna!" he cried, cold fear at his heart. "What's happened to you?"

There was a gasp from Durklun, and the Tala's invisible fingers parted the dark hair on the back of the struggling girl's skull, disclosing a circular, livid scar.

They stared from it down at Rogor and on the back of the fallen traitor's skull saw a similar scar. As they stared in stupefaction they heard from the distant corridors a growing rush of many feet, a clang of nearing swords.

"Those scars!" cried Durklun. "They mean that we're too late, that the great brain has already removed the brains of this girl and the others and that she's now only one of his mindless puppets! The brain knows through her that we're here and is rousing all its guards against us! We've no hope now of getting back out of this city!"

5. In the Brain Chamber

"USE our swords! Fight our way out of here!" roared Holk's great voice.

"But Holk, Narna has been changed—made mindless!" cried Merrick frantically, holding the struggling girl.

"Take her with us anyway!" the Corlan cried. "We've got to break out now if ever."

They burst from the cell out into the corridor, Merrick holding the fighting girl with his left arm, his sword in his right.

Down the corridor from the outer part of the tower was rushing toward them a solid mass of the stiff-faced guards, their swords upraised.

"Too late!" came Durklun's voice.

"They've trapped us in here—the brain's got us!"

"By the sun, I'll take some of those frozen-faced creatures with me, then!" yelled Holk.

His sword clashed out against that of the foremost of the oncoming guards at that moment. The great Corlan's invisible blade beat down the brain-man's sword and swept his head from his shoulders in one terrific slice. And now the swords of Merrick and Jurul, and of the invisible Durklun and Zur, met those of the guards.

It was a bloody, staggering confusion of swords and men there in the dim-lit corridor. The brain-guards came on from the outer part of the tower like the mindless things they were, impelled by the commands of the great brain somewhere within. They attacked with the fearlessness of machines. But they met swords backed by men whose desperation matched their own mechanical lack of fear.

Merrick, clinging to Narna with one arm though his heart was leaden with knowledge of her mindless puppet-state of subjection to the brain, stabbed like a man gone mad at the guards who crowded forward. They reeled down from his thrusts, for mindless as they were, their bodies still were human and could be killed. His invisible sword was now red-stained and visible.

Holk was yelling hoarsely at the top of his voice, his shouts making the corridors ring. Before the sweeping slashes of the crimson-faced warrior's blade the guards were going down like ripe grain. Shoulder to shoulder with Holk and Merrick, Jurul fought in the deadly fashion that was his own. He had begun to laugh a little as he fought, and now as the fight grew wilder he was laughing more and more, his eyes glittering as his lightning-like strokes stabbed out.

It was Durklun and Zur who were doing the most execution, though. The invisible men constantly changed position and out of the empty air their stabs struck down the unseeing guards. The two Talas seemed at once nowhere and everywhere, the only evidence of their presence the bodies that tumbled here and there from their strokes.

Ordinary men could not have come on against the deadly blades of these five. But the brain-guards were not mere men, they were bodies actuated by a distant mind that drove them on to the attack. More and more guards crowded into the corridor from the outer end, climbing stiffly over the pile of slain to attack.

Merrick and his companions were forced back along the corridor despite themselves. They left its floor slippery with blood as they backed along, Merrick still holding Narna in the circle of his left arm. She had not ceased to struggle against him, actuated by the commands of the great brain whose will now swayed her body.

Holk slipped on the bloody floor and went down, and the guards leaped at his prone form. Jurul sprang over his comrade and the slender Corlan's blade for a few terrific moments danced like a destroying death among the brain-men. Holk had a chance to regain his feet, but now the five were hard-pressed to hold back the attackers.

Merrick, dull desperation in his heart, struck and stabbed until a voice yelled in his ear. It was the voice of Zur.

"There's a door back here!" the Tala was crying. "We can bar the other side."

"Holk! Jurul! Back this way!" Merrick cried at once.

He and Holk and Jurul, at a shouted command from the two Talas, turned and raced for the door at the corridor's inner end, Merrick half-dragging Narna along.

The brain-men ran quickly after them

like wolves after prey, but out of the empty air death smote suddenly among them as they met the two invisible men.

Durklun and Zur held off the brain-men until the others were through the door, then raced through it after them.

"All right, bar the door!" yelled Zur.

Merrick slammed the heavy metal door shut and shot the bar home as the brain-guards threw themselves against it. It quivered beneath their impact, but held. They could be heard hammering against it.

Merrick looked around. They were in a narrow corridor, apparently leading inward into the tower.

He looked desperately into the fixed, unhuman eyes of the girl he held. "Narna!" he cried. "Surely you know me, Merrick?"

"It's no use, Chan Merrick!" Durklun exclaimed. "You're not talking to Narna but to the brain that now possesses her body."

The metal door shook violently as the brain-guards hammered upon it. "We've got to find some way out of here!" Holk said. "They'll have that door down in a minute more."

"This corridor leads inward—we'll never get out by it!" he cried, after a glance along it.

"What difference whether we get out or not when there's a fight like this to take part in?" Jurul exclaimed.

The ordinarily quiet Corlan's face was laughing, exultant, transfigured with the wild joy of battle.

Merrick took a step forward, still holding Narna. "On down this corridor!" he ordered. "We may find a passage that leads outward."

"Even if we did get out of the tower it would do us no good," came Zur's cool voice. "The whole city has been roused against us now by the brain."

They hastened along the corridor, around one turn and then another. There were no cross-passages. They could hear the metal door behind cracking beneath the brain-men's assault.

They raced around still another turn in the dim-lit corridor, came face to face with another door. But this one was closed and immovable.

"A blind alley!" Jurul cried. "Well, this is as good a place to end as any."

He turned, raising his blood-stained blade in readiness. But Merrick caught his arm.

"No, there must be a way to get this door open," he cried. "It can't be barred on the other side, for if there were brain-men on the other side to bar it, they'd have come out against us. There must be some secret way of opening it. If we can find it we still have a chance."

He began hastily to run his hand around the door-frame in search of a secret button or switch. The others, except for Narna who still struggled silently, followed his example.

Suddenly something clicked under Holk's fingers and the door swung open. They heard the first door go down with a crash as they threw themselves through this one. Merrick swung it shut, looked frantically for a bar, then saw a metal catch and shot it home.

The brain-men reached the door and hurtled against it as they did so. But now Merrick and the others were staring around this place into which they had burst from the corridor.

It was a huge, circular hall with floor and walls and high domed ceiling of burnished metal. Light from some hidden source illuminated this great room brilliantly and flashed and shimmered from the shining walls. At the hall's center was a sunken metal tank thirty feet across. In the tank, connected by a myriad of slender cables to tall mechan-

isms all around the hall's edge, there lay an enormous, corrugated soft gray mass that twitched and quivered slightly.

"It's the brain!" Merrick yelled. "We've penetrated into the chamber of the great brain itself!"

"Then here's where I end the brain and its people once and for all!" cried Durklun. They heard the invisible man leap forward, saw his red-stained sword flash up to strike the giant, helpless brain.

Merrick caught his arm. "No, don't do it."

Durklun struggled, his voice expressing his stupefaction. "Why not? Don't you realize that if I destroy the great brain here, all those mindless people out there will sink down in death?"

"Let him do it, Chan Merrick!" Holk cried. "We'll end this hell-city for all time!"

"No, you can't!" Merrick cried. "Narna here—she's one of its mindless puppets too now, and if you kill the brain she dies with all the rest."

They stared at the girl, who was still struggling to free herself from Merrick's grasp.

From outside came crash after crash as the brain-men in the corridor hurled themselves against the door.

"What are we going to do, then?" Holk demanded. "That damned brain will have its guards in here on us in a moment."

"There's just one chance to save Narna," Merrick said. "You told us, Durklun, that the brains removed from prisoners were preserved and treated for a while before being added to the great brain?"

"Yes, that is what the Tala prisoner who escaped from here said," Durklun answered.

"Very well," Merrick said swiftly. "If Narna's brain is preserved somewhere here, we can make the great brain have it put back into her skull or we'll kill it!"

They stared. "But how can you make the thing there understand?" Holk said, motioning to the huge gray mass.

"Through Narna herself!" Merrick exclaimed. "She's now one of its puppets and we can speak to it through her!"

He took the girl and twisted her about so that her eyes looked into his. It was not the fine, sensitive face of the Narna he loved that faced him, but a cold, unhuman mask whose fixed eyes had behind them an intelligence vastly greater than any human one.

Merrick spoke to her. "You, the great brain, understand me when I speak to you, do you not?" he said.

"I understand you, of course," the brain answered through the girl's stiff lips. "I have been listening to what you said."

"Then you know our proposition," Merrick told it. "Unless you have this girl's brain replaced, you and your creatures die."

"I am willing to do what you say," the brain answered. "But you must promise that when her brain is replaced you will leave here without harming me."

"We promise," Merrick said readily, "on condition that you allow us all to leave your city without harm."

"You have my promise," the brain assured him.

At that moment the hammering on the door ceased and was succeeded by silence.

"You observe," the brain said through Narna's lips, "that my guards are no longer trying to break in. I am now having some of my scientists remove this girl's brain from the treatment-serums and bring it here with the instruments necessary for replacing it in her skull."

In a few minutes there was a sound of footsteps outside the door.

"It is the party of my scientists with

the girl's brain," said the great brain. "Allow them to enter."

Merrick hesitated. "Holk, you and Jurul stand there beside the great brain," he said. "If any guards come through that door, strike at the brain at once."

"There is no need for these precautions," the brain told him. "I am only too anxious to have you gone from this chamber, where no enemy has ever before penetrated."

HOLK and Jurul took their positions with upraised swords and Merrick opened the locked door.

Four of the stiff-faced brain-men were outside, bearing wheeled instruments and metal containers. They came inside, and Merrick again locked the door.

The brain spoke again to Merrick through Narna. "The operation will now take place. Do not interrupt."

Stiffly Narna stretched herself upon a wheeled table the scientists had brought. The four scientists quickly adjusted a cap-like metal thing upon her skull. They connected it to other instruments, and there was a hum of force. They lifted off the cap and with it a circle of the girl's cranium. Merrick, watching sickly, saw them deftly remove from her skull a compact little metal apparatus, the receiving-apparatus by which the great brain had controlled her body.

The scientists then took from one of the containers the small gray mass of the girl's own brain, skilfully and gently fitted it into her skull, fused nerve-endings together once more. Then the metal cap-thing was replaced, the forces hummed again, and when the cap was lifted her cranium was again solid and unbroken, save for a round scar.

Merrick, watching with his heart pounding, saw Narna open her eyes. Gone from them was the look of stiff mindlessness, and gone from her eyes the fixed expression. She sat up, saw him and reached her arms toward him.

"Chan Merrick!" And as he held her she said wonderingly, "What has happened?"

"You remember nothing, Narna?" he asked.

"Nothing but that Rogor brought me here after tossing you and Holk and Jurul from the air-boat. Guards seized us, scientists came with mechanisms, and then all was blackness."

Merrick told her briefly what had happened. Then he became aware that the great brain was speaking again to him, now through the lips of one of the scientists.

"The girl is now restored to her former state," the brain said. "You will now fulfill your part and leave this chamber and the city."

"Remember that we are not to be molested going through the city," Merrick warned.

"You will not be," the brain answered. "I have given you my promise."

"All right, Holk!" Merrick said. "Open the door and we'll get going."

HOLK opened the door. The corridor outside was quite empty.

"You will meet with no resistance in leaving," the brain told them. "But go as quickly as possible."

"Come on," Merrick told the others, starting through the door with Holk and Jurul, Narna clinging to him. "Durklun, are you and Zur there?"

"We're coming," answered the voices of the two invisible men, behind.

They went through the corridor, meeting no one, and on through the next corridor, over the dead they had slain. Merrick, walking with Narna by his side, felt as though they had experienced a strange dream. Through corridor after corridor they went until ahead they saw bright

sunlight. Dawn had come while they were in the tower, and they hastened their steps along this last corridor.

"By the sun, we did it!" Holk was exclaiming. "Got a captive away from the great brain of Kaldar!"

"I never thought it possible," Jurul said. "It was Chan Merrick who—look out!"

Jurul's yell of warning came too late. From doors on either side of the corridor, scores of brain-guards leapt out on them.

The swords of Holk and Jurul accounted for a few of the brain-men in the first moment of surprize, but they were then borne down by sheer weight of numbers in the narrow hall. Held helpless by scores of hands, their weapons were torn from them.

"By heaven, the brain has tricked us!" Merrick cried. "It's broken its promise!"

"Of course I have broken my promise," said the great brain through the brain-guard who held Merrick's arm. "It would be quite irrational for me to allow you to escape simply because I said you could. You will all make very excellent slaves like these others when your brains have been removed," it continued. "My guards will take you now to——"

The words stopped in the brain-guard's throat. He stared, his eyes and face suddenly blank; then he fell prone, lifeless. And all the other brain-men in the corridor were falling limp and dead in the same moment. Looking out into the sunlit city outside, Merrick and his companions saw all the throngs of the brain-city wilting down simultaneously like flowers slain by frost!

"They're dead!" said Holk unbelievingly. "By the sun, they're all dead!"

"But how—what——" Jurul said, stupefied.

"The brain!" Merrick cried. "Something must have happened to the great brain."

They turned to race back to the brain chamber and collided squarely with two invisible forms approaching from there. They were Durklun and Zur, and the swords the two invisible men carried were now gray-smeared.

"You!" cried Merrick. "You two stayed there in the chamber—destroyed the great brain!"

"We did!" said Durklun triumphantly. "We heard you promise not to harm the brain, but *we* made no promise. We said we were following you, but we stayed there in the chamber, invisible and unsuspected. Then when the scientists had gone we went over and slashed the great brain into a mass of fiber. We've killed the greatest enemy that the race of Talas ever had."

"And you've saved us all!" Merrick said, and related to them the brain's last treachery.

"Let's get out of this place," Holk urged. "One more hour here and I feel that I'll become a gibbering madman."

"The air-boat on which Rogor brought me here must be somewhere outside this tower," Narna exclaimed.

Search through the dead-strewn structures outside the tower soon located the air-boat. In a few moments Holk had its motors working, and as they hummed with power, Jurul sent the craft slanting up into the light of rising Antares. Merrick and Narna and the two invisible men stood beside him.

"Make for the city of the Talas, and when we've left Durklun and Zur there we'll head back home to Corla," Merrick said.

"It's really too bad," Jurul said regretfully as he looked back, "that we never did get to finish that fight in the corridor."

Holk's great paw swept down on him.

"That's enough, Jurul! I've had all of that place I want, and I don't want ever to see it again, not even in my dreams."

Merrick, with Narna close beside him, looked back as the air-boat darted over the crimson jungle. The gray city with its hosts of silent, dead forms, was receding rapidly behind them, and was soon swallowed up almost completely by the red vegetation. Only the gray tip of the central tower still stood out against the blazing disk of rising Antares, marking the place of the dead city of the dead great brain. Then that too vanished and nothing remained visible against the crimson glory of the climbing sun.

The Haunted Castle

By W. L. HASTY, JR.

I smashed the lock which held the brazen gate;
  I slew the dragon at the golden door;
Slashed to the heart the harpy and its mate;
  Panting, I sprang across the throne-room floor.

The room was empty; but I shouted loud,
  Thinking them hiding, frightened at the din;
Echoes came trooping like a devil's crowd
  And mocked my voice till it seemed weak and thin.

Madly I ran through endless lofty halls,
  Shrieking that all within the house were free;
That ancient spells long guarding these dark walls
  Were broken down in thundering blows, by me.

But no one answers—shadows hurtle out
  Of rooms where whispers have just died away.
I stalk them endlessly; I cannot rout
  These slithering Things no mortal's sword may slay.

The Carnival of Death

By ARLTON EADIE

A thrilling mystery story of the present day—an eery adventure with a Golden Mummy, and strange death that walked at night

The Story Thus Far

WILMER DENTON, a young American archeologist acting for Lord Mounthead, finds a hidden Egyptian tomb containing rich treasures. The Egyptian Government permits Lord Mounthead to keep one of the mummies, which is that of a priest of Anubis, wearing the priest's high regalia of solid gold.

Denton had found the secret crypt by observing the actions of a mysterious Egyptian, named Kareef, whose groping fingers touched a secret spring that opened a trap-door from the tomb into the hidden mummy chamber. With fanatic zeal, Kareef warns the American against despoiling the tomb. After the Golden Mummy is taken to England, Kareef sends Lord Mounthead a message threatening him with death unless the mummy is returned to Egypt.

At dead of night, Lord Mounthead and Denton capture a marauder in the house, who proves to be a Russian named Boris Matrikoff. Matrikoff is obsessed with the belief that Denton's discovery of the Golden Mummy was made possible by a tip from him to Lord Mounthead, and that the mummy therefore is rightfully his.

Meanwhile Denton and Lord Mounthead's daughter Celia have fallen in love. Her stepmother, Lady Thelma (a former actress), tries to break up this affair, prompted by Lord Mounthead's secretary, Edwin Lorimer, an unscrupulous scoundrel who wants to marry Celia himself and thus gain possession of her fortune. Lorimer holds over Lady Thelma the threat to let Lord Mounthead know that she has never been divorced from her first husband, an actor named Claude Delorme, whom she had believed to be dead when she married Lord Mounthead. But Claude Delorme is alive.

To discredit Denton, Lady Thelma tells Lord Mounthead that Denton has been making love to her; and Lorimer hires an actor to imitate Denton's voice in a violent love scene with Lady Thelma. Completely fooled, Lord Mounthead orders the young American from the house. But Lorimer has made a blunder in his choice of an actor, for unwittingly he has picked Claude Delorme, Lady Thelma's real husband!

Kareef has followed Lord Mounthead to England, and he promises Denton to clear him of his troubles if he will steal the Golden Mummy for Kareef. Denton refuses. Meanwhile still another claimant to the Golden Mummy appears, in the person of Professor Artemus Figg, who believes he has found how to restore mummies to life when they are embalmed with the insides intact, as the Golden Mummy has been.

Lady Thelma's husband confronts her and demands £5,000 as the price of his silence. Lady Thelma steals the money from the strange safe in which Lord Mounthead keeps Celia's legacy; but Celia finds out, and substitutes some torn pages from a magazine in the envelope for Delorme.

An X-ray picture of the Golden Mum-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for September

"From her breast protruded the hilt of the sacrificial dagger that had been found in the coffin of the Golden Mummy."

my reveals that its ornate jewels are nothing but paste, a discovery that amazes Lord Mounthead.

Claude Delorme, furious when he finds out he has been duped, attends a fancy dress ball at Mounthead Chase, and threatens Lady Thelma that he will reveal all to Lord Mounthead. Goaded beyond endurance, Thelma tries to shoot him, but they are interrupted by the Golden Mummy, which stalks through the hall like a living being! Delorme fires four shots at the oncoming horror, without effect, and then in desperation shoots out the lights. Lady Thelma's death scream shrills out in the night, as Celia and Denton, who had attended the ball disguised as Claude Duval, the famous highwayman, are exchanging confidences in the hall below.

The story continues:

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18. A Message in Blood

WILMER DENTON was talking to Celia when the sounds of the distant shots came faintly to their ears.

"Hullo! Where's the shooting?" he cried, but Celia gave a dubious shake of her head.

"It seemed to come from the upper part of the house," she hazarded.

"The upper floors are in darkness, miss," announced the white-faced butler who came panting up at that moment. "Her ladyship's maid says she thinks the firing came from the boudoir."

Wilmer swung round on the footmen who clustered behind the butler and rapped out orders in quick succession. His manner showed that he, for one, did not underrate the gravity of the situation.

"Two of you run and get candles—lamps—anything that will give light. The rest are to station themselves at the doors and allow no one to leave until we have found out what's happened."

"Shall I 'phone to the police?" asked the butler.

"Yes, get through to them at once. I fancy they'll be needed."

Israel Appenheim, who was standing near, now stepped forward. "Chief Inspector Tranter is already on his way from Scotland Yard, in consequence of the information that I wired to him about the radiograph which revealed that the jewels were not genuine," he informed the company in general. "He may arrive at any moment now."

"That's very fortunate." The young American's tone was grim. "I shall be very much surprized if he does not find a case of a more serious nature awaiting his attention when he gets here."

Lord Mounthead came along the corridor at that moment, accompanied by two footmen with candles.

The old man merely nodded coldly when Wilmer explained hurriedly what they had heard; then he led the way upstairs, followed by all the men of the party.

"Shot out," was his terse comment.

The next moment they were inside the boudoir, gazing down at the motionless body of Lady Thelma. She was quite dead, and from her rounded breast there protruded the sphinx-shaped hilt of the sacrificial dagger that had been found in the coffin of the Golden Mummy.

"My God!—stabbed in the dark!" The hoarse, barely articulate cry issued from the throat of Lord Mounthead. "She's—dead—murdered . . ." With a loud groan the old man collapsed senseless on the floor.

"Take him to his room," Wilmer ordered crisply. Then, carefully avoiding passing near the body, he stepped across the polished wood floor to the telephone and asked to be put through to the nearest doctor.

BARELY had he replaced the receiver when the sound of voices was heard, and a moment later Chief Inspector Tranter entered. With him was Terry Doyle, the star reporter and crime investigator of the *Planet,* a very enterprising and up-to-the-minute newspaper.

"I was called up to look into a different matter altogether," the police officer observed. "Luckily I came in person. What's the trouble here? Murder?"

"It looks very much like it," Wilmer said cautiously.

Inspector Tranter nodded curtly and began a systematic examination of the room. A moment later he was pointing down at something near the body. "Yes, it's murder, all right. Look there!"

Scrawled in large letters in the light wood floor, evidently by means of her forefinger dipped in blood, was the dying message of Thelma Mounthead.

"This must have been written in the dark," said Terry. "See how some of the letters overlap the others."

"Yet its meaning is clear enough to hang the murderer," Tranter muttered grimly; then he read aloud: *"I have been stabbed by Claude D——"*

The final word ended in a meaningless

Lady Thelma

smear, upon the end of which the dead woman's finger still rested.

"She died even as she wrote the name of her slayer," said the inspector solemnly. "With her last conscious action she has placed the noose around his neck!"

Here they were interrupted by the arrival of the local police. Having detailed sufficient men to relieve the footmen who had been guarding the exits, Inspector Tranter sought out Lorimer and asked for a list of the names of the guests present. To his disappointment he failed to find one that might be interpreted as the name written by the dying woman.

"Strange," he muttered, tugging his mustache savagely.

Lorimer stepped forward with a suggestion.

"You must understand that all the guests were in fancy dress—historical characters, to be precise," he explained suavely. "What if poor Lady Thelma wrote the assumed character of her murderer?"

"By heaven! you've hit it!" exclaimed Tranter.

Under his directions the guests were lined up, and of each he demanded to know the name of the character he or she represented. By this time Lord Mounthead had recovered sufficiently to take an interest in the proceedings, and he urged the police officers to use their utmost efforts to bring the murderer to justice.

Presently it was Wilmer Denton's turn to be questioned.

"What character do you represent?" Tranter asked him.

"Claude Duval."

"*Claude Duval*—it is the very name that the dying woman tried to write!"

The inspector made a sign and two constables seized Wilmer. A sharp tug brought away his flowing wig, another revealed his smooth-shaven face beneath the false mustache and imperial, and for the first time that evening he stood undisguised.

For a moment Lord Mounthead stared at him in speechless amazement.

"You dared to come here after I had forbidden you the house?" he cried thickly. Then he stretched out his hand and pointed a trembling finger at his former assistant. "You slew my wife! So this was your revenge on the woman who had repulsed your treacherous love!"

"There was another motive—robbery!" Inspector Tranter cried as he drew the wad of banknotes from the prisoner's pocket. "I intend to place you under arrest now, and it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence."

The answer that Wilmer made to this warning was such as to cause the inspector's brows to knot in a puzzled frown.

"The Vengeance of the Death God has fallen on me!" he said in a voice of bleak despair. "The Golden Mummy will claim not one victim—but *two!*"

19. Delorme's Farce

It was three weeks later when Celia Mounthead returned to her home after hearing the magistrate commit the man she loved to take his trial at the next assizes on a charge of wilful murder.

Claude Delorme

She had sat through the weary hours, listening with clenched hand and tensely drawn face to the

recital of the damning facts skilfully marshaled by the prosecuting counsel. The numerous witnesses had followed, each contributing his or her quota of evidence, each adding another strand to the hangman's rope which was slowly weaving itself before her mental eye.

She heard it all like a woman in a dream—her father's story of having overheard the accused making love to the victim—the threats he had subsequently uttered against her—his quarrel with her on the very night of the crime—the fact that he was in the house at the time, masked and disguised — the message traced in crimson that seemed to place his guilt beyond all doubt.

She herself had gone into the witness-box to explain how the roll of banknotes had been found in Wilmer's pocket, and also to testify that he had been in her company when the fatal shots were heard. With a sinking heart she realized that her testimony was regarded merely as a loyal but vain attempt to save the life of the man she loved.

Only once was the tension of the proceedings relieved, and that was when Professor Artemus Figg made his excited entry and insisted on being heard. But the eccentric old man's theory that the murder had been committed by the Golden Mummy, which he gravely claimed to have brought back to life, met with nothing but laughter and ridicule. In the end the professor had become so excited and abusive that the magistrate had ordered him to be detained so that the state of his mind might be inquired into.

The arrival of Terry Doyle, the star reporter of the *Planet*, proved a welcome diversion from her gloomy thoughts. Terry was the crime expert of that eminently progressive newspaper, and he frequently regaled the public with the inside story of a baffling mystery with such promptitude that the solution came as enlightening news to the police as well as the general public.

His first words sent a wave of returning hope through her heart.

"I've come here with your father's full consent to make a little private investigation into this most puzzling case. To my mind the police theory leaves too much unexplained. I have an idea that Wilmer Denton had nothing whatever to do with the murder, and it will mean a big scoop for the *Planet* if I can prove him innocent. The strangest part of the affair is that the Golden Mummy disappeared about the same time as the murder was committed. That strikes me as being something more than a mere coincidence. I suppose the police don't suspect poor Wilmer of stealing *that*, too?"

"Scarcely." Celia managed to smile at the absurdity of the idea. "The police seem to regard the disappearance of the mummy as a matter of minor importance. My father is quite reconciled to its loss, too. He says that the radiograph proves that the jewels were counterfeit, and that has been confirmed by the experts who were called in immediately after the crime."

"Not only were the jewels fakes," Terry supplemented with a smile, "but the radiograph itself was also a fake! A minute examination by one of our own experts has brought to light the fact that the X-ray photograph, which seemed to prove that the Golden Mummy contained a human body, was in fact a composite photo, the shadows of the human bones being skilfully printed in, superimposed on the genuine X-ray negative. Such tricks are common enough in ordinary photography and in cinematograph films, but it is something of a novelty in X-ray work."

Celia was listening with ever-increasing surprize.

"What could be the object of such deception?" she asked.

"It is very evident that the mummy contained something that an interested party, or parties, wished to keep secret," the reporter explained. "You must understand that the X-rays have been vastly improved since their invention by Professor Roentgen in 1895. The modern tube, with its gas-free vacuum, its heating spiral of tungsten and focussing bowl of molybdenum, can penetrate a steel plate 2½ inches in thickness. We used it during the war to examine the internal structure of shells, bombs and ammunition of enemy origin, without taking the risk of opening the various articles. So you see it would have not the slightest difficulty in penetrating the thin sheet of gold which covered the mummy, and showing what was inside. If we were able to see a *genuine* X-ray photo of it, I think it would go a long way toward solving the mystery."

THE look of tragic despair had vanished from the girl's eyes; they were glowing with returning hope as she eagerly asked:

"Is it possible that you think the mummy really came to life and killed my stepmother?"

Terry Doyle smiled as he shook his head. "I'd hardly like to go so far as that. But whoever may have struck that blow in the dark, it certainly was not Wilmer Denton.

"But we're miles away from proving his innocence to the satisfaction of a judge and jury," he went on presently, as though unwilling to raise false hopes. "It might be a bit of a help to me if I could have a quiet look round the scene of the crime. Your father told me that the room had not been disturbed since the body was removed."

"That is correct," she nodded. "It was locked up immediately the police took their departure. I will get the key now. And, whether you succeed or fail, I'd like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your sympathy and help."

Celia M[illegible]

Quickly the reporter made an examination. Every article lay as it was on the night of the tragedy. The writing, now dried and blackened, was visible on the floor; a chair lay overturned near by; the revolver, with four barrels discharged, had been replaced in its original position. It was to this weapon that Terry turned his attention.

"Strange that she should have fired three shots—stranger still that she should have fired to extinguish the lights. I should have thought that darkness would have been the very thing a threatened person would dread."

"The police theory is that she hit the fuse-box while aiming at Wilmer Denton," said Celia.

Terry mentally calculated the angle at which the weapon must have been discharged in order to reach that spot. Then he shook his head.

"Scarcely likely," he mused. "And what became of the other three bullets? Wilmer is not wounded. Of course, I know that Tranter thinks she may have fired to summon help—an unlikely course of action when she had a bell-push close handy. The bullets must have gone somewhere. The question is: where?"

Presently he turned his attention to the dainty inlaid bureau in the corner, pulling out the drawers and glancing through the litter of letters and miscellaneous pa-

pers they contained. A bulky roll of manuscript caught his eye.

Celia smiled as she saw him take it in his hand.

"The police have already examined that," she informed. "It is quite unimportant—merely the script of a one-act play. Probably it is a relic of Thelma's theatrical career. At any rate, it can't have any connection with the crime."

Terry nodded absently. It was more from a feeling of idle curiosity than anything else that he unfolded the sheaf of papers and began to read the ill-written words. He smiled at the title, which seemed more suitable to a melodrama of the beginning of the last century than a modern play:

THE PRICE OF HER HONOR
or
LADY MOUNTHEAD'S SECRET.

"Lady Mounthead!" muttered Terry, his eyes lighting up with interest. "Strange that it should be her own name. I thought playwrights and authors were careful to steer clear of the names of actual persons."

His amazement increased as he read the list of *dramatis personæ. Lord Mounthead—Celia (his daughter by a former marriage)—Edwin Lorimer (his secretary)—John Mapes (butler at The Chase).*

"Why, this seems to have been written round the inmates of this house!" He turned to the girl with a question: "Is this in Lady Thelma's writing?"

Celia shook her head.

"It is quite different," she declared positively.

"I'll take this away with me, if I may," said Terry. "Of course it may be only a play written by some friend and intended to be used for amateur theatricals. On the other hand it may be something quite different. It will take some time to get through it, however, for the penmanship is vile. I should imagine whoever wrote it was laboring under some strong emotion."

His further search having failed to bring anything more to light, Terry and Celia soon afterward took their departure. On his arrival at Fleet Street, Terry was informed that an urgent message had come for him during the morning requesting his presence at Scotland Yard. He lost no time in hurrying along the Thames Embankment, and the celerity with which he was ushered into the presence of Chief Inspector Tranter proved that he was eagerly expected.

A dark-skinned man of middle age, wearing irreproachable European dress except for the red fez which decorated his head, rose to his feet with an elaborate bow as Terry entered the room.

"This is Achmet Bey, a prominent official of the Egyptian Government," explained Inspector Tranter. "He has brought some important information regarding the antecedents of the man whom we know as Kareef the Egyptian."

20. *The Secret of the Golden Mummy*

"YES, we of the Egyptian Government have good reason to know of this Kareef," said Achmet Bey, when he had settled himself to his story. "His history is a curious one. Of his parentage we know nothing; but we have ascertained that at the age of nine years he was taken into the employment of a mission doctor who was stationed at Atbara, a small town on the Upper Nile. He was a quick, intelligent lad, and during the ten years that he remained with the Reverend Cyrus Balam he took every advantage of his opportunities of acquiring a knowledge of Western learning. Too much so, in fact, for at the end of that time he made a very creditable copy of Balam's name on a check, cashed it, and

with the proceeds set out for a land where his talents would have a wider scope than was offered by the tiny desert town. I am uncertain whether he fell in with Boris Matrikoff before his arrival in England or after. But it is certain that the two very quickly formed an alliance.

"Matrikoff, it may surprize you to learn, is a very skilful mechanical engineer, and at that time he had just succeeded in completing a very life-like automaton in the shape of a human figure. In other words, he has made a mechanical man."

"The Golden Mummy!" Terry could not help exclaiming.

Achmet Bey acknowledged the correctness of his guess with a grave inclination of his head.

"Exactly. The so-called mummy was nothing more than a robot. By means of electrical mechanism within the body, the figure was able to make certain very life-like movements. A gyroscope enabled it to retain its balance when walking, and by an ingenious arrangement it could be made to go through certain actions in rotation, such as walking, running, making a bow, extending its arms, and so forth. But it was incapable of speech, and it was to remedy this defect that Matrikoff joined forces with Kareef. He was a born ventriloquist, and practise enabled him to throw his voice so cunningly that it appeared to issue from the lips of the mummy itself."

"I've heard him," observed Terry grimly. "But pray continue."

"For several years Kareef and Matrikoff toured the English music-halls, describing themselves on the bills as 'Kareef the Egyptian, in his Marvelous Display of Mysticism, Mesmerism, Magic and Mystery. Hear Rameses, the Mummy, foretell your future,' and a lot more in the same vein. Needless to say," he went on with a smile, "the voice of the defunct 'Rameses' was that of Kareef, saying just what he thought would please the credulous people who came on the stage to consult the oracle.

"Naturally, as they were unable to invent any strikingly new business in an exhibition of that description, the novelty soon wore off as far as English theaters were concerned. Consequently Kareef took his show to Paris, where he stayed for a time, and from there he made his way by easy stages through Switzerland into Italy. From Brindisi he crossed to Alexandria, and here he found that he had struck a veritable gold mine. The crude 'magic,' which had been but a diversion to Europeans, seemed like a veritable miracle to the more ignorant and impressionable Orientals. The farther he moved up country, the greater became the power and influence of the Golden Mummy. Gifts of gold and jewels were showered upon it—or rather, I should say on its unscrupulous possessors. But gradually Kareef's plans grew more ambitious than the mere accumulation of wealth. He began to throw out hints that his mummy was the reincarnation of an ancient Pharaoh, and had come to free Egypt from the yoke of the British. In short, gentlemen, he aspired to rule the country by virtue of its powers.

"From one of his adherents he learnt of the existence of the secret tomb of Anubis, and from that time the ceremonies were conducted only in the presence of those who had been sworn to secrecy.

"By this time Kareef had obtained so great a hold on the ignorant and superstitious *fellaheen* that he might have succeeded in his object had not a consideration intervened which has wrecked more ambitious schemes before now. Matrikoff and he had a violent quarrel over the division of the spoil, and the

upshot of it was that the Russian revealed the whole plot to the Government.

Of course we had been aware for some time that something unusual was afoot, but I will admit that we were astounded and appalled to learn of the many ramifications of the plot. Kareef's dupes numbered hundreds of thousands—and those who were too wise to believe in his bluff pretended to do so for motives of their own. The most direct course of action would have been to have arrested Kareef and confiscated the mummy; but we hit upon a plan that would achieve the same end without risking an uprising.

"Matrikoff, having been suitably rewarded, was induced to get into communication with Lord Mounthead, who had been for some time previously excavating in the neighborhood of the hidden temple. But before he would consent to do this, he, fearing Kareef's vengeance, insisted on returning to Russia. On his arrival he was promptly imprisoned by his fellow countrymen, and it appears that his communication to Lord Mounthead went astray. Fortunately, however, the temple was in the meantime discovered by a young American in his lordship's employ, and the false mummy, together with several genuine ones, brought to light. In accordance with the terms of Lord Mounthead's permit to excavate, we retained the genuine specimens, handing over to him—the Golden Mummy."

Achmet Bey's white teeth showed for an instant in an amused smile.

"No doubt his lordship thought us childishly simple to present him with what appeared to be the gem of the collection, but what he thought to be a blunder on our part was, in fact, a stroke of carefully thought out diplomacy. We wanted to get rid of the miracle-working mummy without any fuss or bother, and we assumed that when it was once reposing in his well-guarded museum we should hear nothing more of Kareef and his followers. Imagine, then, our surprize and, I may confess, consternation to hear that the mummy had disappeared and was presumably once more in the hands of its ambitious owner. I at once received orders from my Government to acquaint you with the true facts of the case in order that you could take steps to prevent Kareef leaving this country. I need hardly stress the grave complications which would ensue were he to succeed in again reaching Egypt."

At the conclusion Inspector Tranter gave Terry a meaning look.

"Seems to me as if this Kareef is the hub around which the whole of the mystery revolves," he observed. "I wish I knew where his headquarters were."

"I can tell you that," cried Terry, and went on to explain that he had, some time since, shadowed the Egyptian to a lonely house on Plumstead Marshes.

The inspector got out a large-scale map of the district and spread it on the desk.

"Here we are," he said, pointing to the little square which marked the site. "It's quite near the testing-grounds of the Royal Arsenal, I see."

Terry nodded.

"About a quarter of a mile west of the Proof Butts, where they test the new guns," he told the police officer. "I've learnt since that the reason why the windows have been fitted with iron shutters was to prevent them being broken by the concussion of the firing."

Inspector Tranter remained for several minutes in deep thought.

"There's a certain major of artillery in charge there who is an old comrade-in-arms of mine," he said at length. "I rather fancy he'd be willing to give me a little active assistance without using up much red tape in the process. We'll raid

that house tonight. I suppose you'd like to make one of the party?"

"You're a true guesser, Inspector," said Terry Doyle.

"And," said Tranter as Terry was departing, "bring something else in your pocket besides a note-book. There's going to be pyrotechnic trimmings to this night's entertainment—and the fireworks might not be all on one side!"

21. Lorimer Makes a Proposal

CELIA MOUNTHEAD sat alone in the great library of Mounthead Chase, her mind busily occupied with her sad thoughts, when there came a tap at the door and Edwin Lorimer entered.

The man's demeanor seemed to have undergone some subtle change. Though his attitude as he came forward was deferential, the domineering smile on his thin lips and the hard glitter of his eyes as he fixed them on the girl seemed to denote the master instead of the salaried dependent.

"Pardon my intruding myself upon you, Miss Celia," he said smoothly. "But I felt as if I must have a talk with you at once."

She looked up and was conscious of his eyes fixed on hers, cold, calculating, a hidden menace in their dark depths.

"What do you want, Mr. Lorimer," she asked coldly, fighting down the vague misgivings which beset her.

"I would like to help you," was the unexpected reply.

Celia laid aside her book and looked him full in the face. Her only emotion now was one of blank surprize.

"To help me?" she repeated. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

The man licked his lips nervously as he shot a glance at the door behind him. He stepped a pace nearer and lowered his voice to an eager whisper.

"Wilmer Denton will have to stand his trial soon," he said.

"That is common knowledge. Have you come here to tell me that?"

He took no notice of the sarcasm in her voice as he went on hurriedly.

"In a few weeks—in a few days, maybe—the jury will have to decide whether he is guilty or not guilty—whether he shall live—or die!"

Lorimer had dropped all pretense of humility now; he spat out the last word with a venomous relish.

Celia rose to her feet abruptly, her whole body quivering with indignation.

"Really, Mr. Lorimer——"

"Hear me out!" he cried roughly. "Listen to what I have to say, or you'll be sorry!"

"I am listening," she said quietly.

"At Wilmer Denton's trial the same witnesses will be heard that appeared at the police court. They will give the same evidence—with the same result. Nothing can save him. The jury will file back into court, the judge will ask the usual question; the foreman will rise and utter the fatal word. Then the judge will assume the black cap and pronounce the sentence which will condemn the man you love to the gallows. All will happen as I have described. Your lover is doomed—unless—unless——"

"Unless——?" The word seemed to be drawn from her without conscious action on her part.

"Unless I save him!" he cried in what sounded like a tone of triumph.

She listened, wide-eyed, her mind filled with incredulous amazement.

"How can you save him?" she found her voice to ask.

"By denouncing the real murderer of Lady Mounthead."

Suddenly she realized the full meaning of his words. Her heart gave a sudden bound of joyous relief.

"Wilmer is innocent—I knew it all along! Not for a single moment did I think that he could have struck that cowardly blow. And you can prove it, you say? You will give evidence that will clear him—produce the real murderer?" She was almost incoherent as the eager words rushed from her lips. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Lorimer. Thank you again and again! You have made me the happiest girl in the whole wide world!"

Lorimer stood motionless, his enigmatical eyes gazing on her with a fixed, unwinking stare.

"And in return," he said slowly, "you must do the same for me."

She returned his gaze blankly. His words were incomprehensible.

"You must make me the happiest man in the world—by becoming my wife."

"Your wife!"

The tone in which she repeated the word sent an ugly red flush into the man's sallow cheeks. At last she understood the price that was being demanded for Wilmer Denton's life.

For a space she could only stand facing him, mute with the violent emotions which passed through her heart in quick succession. Amazement, contempt, loathing, and finally a red-hot indignation possessed her.

"You mean to say that you know something which would clear an innocent man of the crime with which he is charged, and yet you would withhold your evidence unless I comply with your preposterous demand?"

"Exactly."

"Even though it meant the death of one who is guiltless?"

Lorimer's eyes, narrowed to the merest slits, played over her greedily. It was a glare such as a famished leopard might turn upon a shrinking gazelle which he had cunningly stalked until it was cornered beyond hope of escape.

"Even though it meant the death of fifty such!" he cried in a voice hoarse with passion. As he spoke he caught her wrist, drawing her to him until she could feel his quick breath upon her face.

A shudder of revulsion passed through Celia's body. Though her soul writhed under the indignity of this crude and huckstering wooing, she repressed the desire to throw off his hateful grasp. The blind, unreasoning passion which glowed in the eyes of the man who held her loved one's life in his hand seemed to give her strength. Her fear and indignation vanished, giving place to an ice-cold, crystal-like clarity of thought which surprized even herself. She must meet his cunning with a deeper cunning; foil his clumsy trickery by her more subtle woman's wit.

She forced herself to utter a laugh.

"It seems that you have the whip hand," she admitted with a shrug. "But how can I tell that you are not fooling me? What proof have I that you can really do as you say?"

ELATED by her half-submissive tone, Lorimer released her hand and felt in his pocket.

"This is a *copy*—a copy only, please understand—of a letter sent to Lady Thelma a few days before the night of the carnival ball." He handed it to her as he said the words. "Read it—it will explain itself. The original is in safe keeping elsewhere."

Eagerly she scanned the neatly written lines.

My dearest wife, Thelma,

Words cannot describe my joy when a kind providence decreed that once again our paths in life should cross. Little did I dream when I accepted the offer for that special one-night engagement (no need to specify the character I represented) that I should find myself playing opposite my own wife! Truly has it been said that real life is far more dramatic than any stage play. The situation, when I realized the identity of the lady to whom I was making love, proved that

there was one dramatic theme new to the experience of even such a practised old stager as I.

I felt—and I am sure you will agree with me—that a very good little one-act drama could be written round that situation. It would be, of course, but a variation of the old, old triangle—the beautiful bigamist, the millionaire husband, who is not her husband, and the penniless hero (or villain, as the case may be) who is.

I have, in fact, written such a play, and you will no doubt be delighted to hear that I intend giving you the first option of acquiring same. The price is £5,000, cash down, for which sum I agree to make over all rights to you. If, however, you should fail to take advantage of this offer within the space of one week from the date of this letter, I shall deem myself free to offer the play elsewhere.

Perhaps Lord Mounthead would find it interesting reading?

Your affectionate husband,
CLAUDE DELORME.

"Claude Delorme!" she gasped as she read the signature. "That was the name I saw written on the envelope containing the stolen money! Claude Delorme was the unfinished name that Thelma wrote after she had been stabbed. Claude Delorme was the actor who impersonated Wilmer when my father thought he overheard him making love to Thelma. Why, this letter—even though it is a copy—proves——"

"Everything!" he completed the sentence with a short laugh. "But in five minutes it will prove—nothing!"

"How can that be?"

He laughed again.

"Come, come, my dear Celia. Surely you do not think I would be so foolish as to place in your hands even a copy of such a letter without taking precautions to ensure that you should not use it without complying with my terms? That copy has been written in disappearing ink, several varieties of which are readily to be bought, or made by a simple mixture. In five minutes it will be a blank sheet of paper. But the original will be placed in the hands of Wilmer Denton's solicitors, together with information where Delorme may be found, the moment we have been married by special license; then—here—where are you going?" he cried, as the girl made swiftly toward the door.

Edwin Lorimer

She swung round with the light of triumph shining in her eyes.

"To photograph this letter before it fades!"

He gave a laugh that was like a snarl of a wild beast.

"You fool! That letter is useless. Give it back to me!"

Celia shook her head.

"You have admitted that it is a true copy, and that you hold the original with the intention of suppressing it to defeat the ends of justice."

"I deny it! I will admit nothing! There were no witnesses to my words——"

"Indeed, Mr. Lorimer? I rather fancy there were three, counting Miss Celia," said a crisp voice from the doorway, and Terry entered, closely followed by Lord Mounthead. In his hand the reporter held the manuscript of Delorme's one-act play.

Unheeding the stream of savage curses which flowed from the lips of the outwitted schemer, Terry took from his pocket the folding camera which was his inseparable companion, quickly focused it and snapped the shutter as he held it before the fading writing.

"The words may come out a little faint," he observed, "but I can easily get over that by printing the positive a little deeper. That letter, together with the evidence contained in this so-called 'play,' will be sufficient to set things right, even without the production of the original."

Handing the camera with its precious

contents to Lord Mounthead, he requested him and the girl to leave the room.

Lorimer regarded his actions with ill-concealed nervousness.

"Here, what's the big idea?" he blustered.

"The big idea is that you're going to tell me where Claude Delorme is in hiding," he said with grim determination.

"This is illegal!" spluttered Lorimer.

"Quite," Terry agreed cheerfully. "But, as you remarked a few minutes back, there are no witnesses!"

"If you're a policeman——"

"I never was, but I happen to be a pal of Wilmer Denton's. It's the duty of every law-abiding citizen to further the ends of justice, and if my methods are a trifle unconstitutional you can set it down to my ignorance. I only know that you are going to tell me where I can find Claude Delorme or be walloped into a jelly beside which a squashed currant pie would look like a model of symmetry. Put up your fists!"

The fight was short. Five minutes later a much-battered private secretary was limping out of the house, and a very elated reporter was speeding cityward with the certain knowledge that the man he sought had taken refuge with Kareef in the house on Plumstead Marshes.

22. The Mystery Is Solved

TERRY arrived at the headquarters on the Thames Embankment well ahead of time, and at once sought an interview with Inspector Tranter and placed in his hands the evidence he had just acquired. They have a very competent staff of photographic experts at the Yard, and in a short space of time the film in the reporter's camera had been developed and enlarged.

"Let me congratulate you on a very smart piece of work," said Tranter, after the print and the play had received his attention. "This evidence makes things look pretty black against Delorme. Not that I was ever quite sure that Wilmer Denton committed the murder. You yourself must admit that every shred of evidence we then possessed seemed to point to him. But all the same, I did not confine my attention to the American. In spite of the accusation written in her own blood on the floor, I think I weighed up the chances of nearly everybody who was present—invited or uninvited—at the ball."

"Not excepting the Golden Mummy itself?" put in Terry with a smile.

Inspector Tranter nodded rather curtly. He had not failed to note the twinkle of amusement in the other's eyes.

"I don't think I left many possibilities unconsidered," he returned stiffly. "But, to do the police bare justice, you must admit that nobody suspected the thing was a mechanical figure at that stage of the inquiry. Neither did we know of the existence of this Claude Delorme. But I think that I had pretty nearly every person connected with the case under suspicion at one time or another—not excluding the victim's stepdaughter."

"Celia Mounthead?"

"Yes. As you know, there wasn't much love lost between her and her stepmother; and if young Denton had been making love to Lady Thelma (we had no reason to doubt Lord Mounthead's version of the affair at that time), her hatred of her would be intensified by jealousy. Both Denton and Celia frankly admit that they had a quarrel with Lady Thelma shortly before the crime was committed. Then, again, there was the theory of suicide."

Terry Doyle stared. "Such an explanation never entered my head," he confessed.

"But I did not neglect that possibility.

You must remember that Celia had just practically accused Lady Thelma of having stolen the £5,000. Any moment Lord Mounthead might search the safe and tax her with the theft, in which case her relationship to Delorme would have been a secret no longer. I've known people to take the short-cut out of their troubles for much less than that. Then there was the Russian, Boris Matrikoff."

"Was he present that night?"

"He was, in the character of King Henry VIII. When I learnt that, it crossed my mind that he might have killed Lady Thelma in order to steal the jewels she was wearing at the time. To continue the list of persons whom I suspected at one time or another, we come to the eccentric old scientist, Professor Artemus Figg."

"Surely he had no motive to commit a murder."

"He wouldn't need one," said the inspector grimly. "The alienists have decided that he's not responsible for his actions, and he has been sent to an asylum for the insane. I always suspected that he had a screw loose somewhere. By the way, I've since wondered if it was Professor Figg's fool injection that started off the mechanism of the mummy that night."

"Possibly it was," nodded Terry. "Have you any more suspects on your list?"

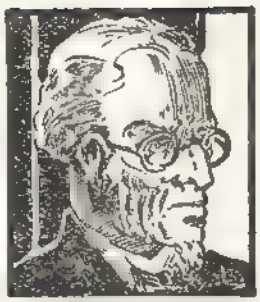
Tranter grinned.

"May as well make it half a dozen," said the unruffled police officer.

Terry ticked off the names on his fingers and shook his head. "I thought you'd exhausted your list. Who's the other possible?"

"The Golden Mummy."

"Eh?" Terry was palpably startled. "Surely in your wildest dreams you never suspected that the murder had been committed by a mechanical figure?"


Artemus Figg

"Why not?" asked Tranter coolly. "You yourself heard Achmet Bey describe the things that it could perform. Even as he was speaking I found myself speculating whether the peculiar shape of the sphinx-shaped hilt was designed to allow the figure to grip the weapon firmly. It is clear that the mechanical figure was wandering round about that time; several of the guests actually saw it, but they assumed that it was a masquerader like themselves. And, really, their mistake was only natural, for there were many costumes quite as fantastic worn at the ball."

"But the written message on the floor——" Terry began to protest.

"Say 'printed', rather," interrupted the inspector. "The letters were so roughly formed that it was impossible to identify them as Lady Thelma's writing. The message might have been a blind."

There was a long pause, broken at length by a laugh from Terry Doyle.

"With all those runners in the field, you ought to be grateful to me for spotting the winner!" he said. "I suppose you're satisfied now that Claude Delorme is the guilty man?"

Inspector Tranter nodded.

"Quite. Delorme is our man, sure enough."

NIGHT had fallen when the three dark-blue cars swung under the granite arch, which gives access to the Embankment, and rapidly made their way eastward. Inspector Tranter and Terry Doyle occupied seats in the foremost; the others were filled to capacity with plain-clothes members of the Flying Squad. That Tranter was not underrating the

danger and difficulty of the task before him was indicated by the ominous fact that every man was armed.

They crossed the river by one of the bridges and turned into the main road which roughly conforms with its south bank, passing in succession through New Cross, Deptford and Greenwich. In a little under the hour they came to a halt in Beresford Square, Woolwich, and here the inspector alighted and made his way through the main gates of the Royal Arsenal. Producing his official card, he presented it to the police sergeant on duty there, and requested permission to use the private telephone which communicated with every department of that great national storehouse and munition factory. Lifting the receiver, he gave a cryptic code letter and number, and, getting through promptly, held a long conversation with an officer who sat in a tiny office near the Proof Butts, about two miles distant from the main gates.

"All set," whispered Tranter to the reporter as he re-entered the car.

It was not until they had left the well-lighted main thoroughfare that Terry realized how much the climatic conditions were favorable to a successful get-away on the part of Kareef and his companions. There was no moon, and, in addition to the inky blackness of the night, a mist was rising from the near-by river, sweeping in ghostly wreaths and low, billowing clouds over the low-lying marshlands. They left the cars in a narrow lane running in the shadow of the railway embankment. A few paces farther on they encountered a rough-looking man who rose suddenly from beneath a stunted bush by the roadside. It was one of the men whom Tranter had ordered to keep observation on the house.

"Anything fresh?" asked the inspector.

"No, sir. Nobody has left the house since I've been here. Stevens and Tuffnel are watching the road to the river. I took a good look at the house before it got dark, sir, and there seemed to be plenty of people moving about inside."

"Very good. Fall in with our party."

"I think they've got a motor-boat somewhere handy," said the man. "I heard a noise like a gasoline engine about half an hour ago, but it was too dark to see anything and I was afraid to approach too near in case I might give the show away."

Tranter stood for a moment in thought; then, in a few whispered words, he began to issue his orders. Suddenly he paused, breathlessly intent, as a faint sound came to his ears.

"What's that?" he whispered.

In the deep silence which followed, a stealthy footfall came from behind them. Someone was approaching the house from the direction whence they had come.

"Out of sight, men," came the whispered order, and silently as specters each man sank to the ground.

Nearer and nearer came the stranger. Now he was opposite the hidden group of detectives. Then out of the blackness came two hands which pinioned his arms to his sides, while another was clapped over his mouth to stifle any cry for help. Carefully shrouding the light with his overcoat so that it was invisible from the house, Tranter sent the beam of his torch into the man's face. His mouth gaped in amazement at the well-known features it revealed.

"Lord Mounthead!" The police officer seemed unable to believe the evidence of his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard Lorimer tell the newspaper reporter that Delorme had taken refuge here," he explained coolly. "So I came down here to assist in the arrest of the murderer of my dear wife. I had a feeling that the mystery of a good many

Wilmer Denton

strange events would be cleared up tonight."

"Your lordship would be far safer in bed," said Tranter grimly. "This night's work is not going to be child's play. There may be very real danger in remaining here."

"Nevertheless, I should like to stay. I promise I will not hamper you in any way, and I may be of assistance. I should like to be in at the death."

With a shrug, Inspector Tranter turned to his men and completed the disposition of his little force. This done, he retreated a few yards up the road and sounded a long blast on his whistle.

Terry's eyes widened in surprize at this seemingly senseless act.

"You've given the alarm!" he cried. "They'll break cover and make for their boat. You can't see a couple of yards in this darkness, and——"

"It will soon be light enough. Watch!"

As he spoke, Inspector Tranter turned his torch westward and gave three flashes in quick succession. A second later there came a distant concussion from the direction of the Proof Butts of Woolwich Arsenal; a prolonged whining drone, followed by a faint *pop* high up in the air, and the whole landscape was lit up by the intense white light which suddenly burst into radiance from a point in the sky immediately above the solitary house.

"Star-shells," said Tranter tersely. "And my artillery major has got the range to a hair. And, look!" he pointed to several crouching figures which had emerged from the house just before the shell went up. "He's caught Kareef's gang just where we want them!"

Kareef

CAUGHT in the open by the remorseless light which glowed above their heads, the knot of men paused, uncertain which way to run. They broke into two scattered groups, one making for the moored motor launch, the other endeavoring to regain the shelter of the house. But whichever way they turned, each road was blocked by a line of stalwart constables, each man holding a leveled pistol.

But Terry Doyle was not a spectator of their subsequent disarming and handcuffing. At the moment when Tranter's attention had been fixed on the main crowd of escaping fugitives, Terry had observed a figure stealthily emerge from a window of the house on the side which backed on to the marsh. Claude Delorme had been too wary to rush into the trap which had ensnared the rest. He had remained behind in the house, and now he was endeavoring to make his way to safety across the winding trails which led across the treacherous surface of the marsh.

Lord Mounthead saw the flying figure, too, and immediately started off in pursuit.

"Come back!" shouted Terry, for he had caught the gleam of metal in the hand of the fugitive. "He's armed."

But Mounthead did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the man who had been the real husband of the girl whom he had loved with a passion of which he had only realized the depth

Lord Mounthead

when he had seen her lifeless form stretched before him.

"Come back!" cried Terry; then he himself began to run toward the rapidly converging pair.

Presently he saw Delorme come to a halt and raise his hand.

"Keep back, damn you!" The words came faintly to Terry's ears.

The two shots followed each other so rapidly that they seemed but one explosion. Delorme threw up his arms, spun round, and pitched forward, a bullet through his brain. Mounthead, his hand pressed to his breast, staggered sideways and slipped, with a despairing cry, into the slimy, mud-bordered creek which ran by the side of the track.

Terry, coming up panting a minute later, tried to reach the sinking man. But his feet sank deeply into the sucking slime. He regained firmer ground with difficulty, and threw himself full length in an endeavor to reach the man and pull him out of the quagmire that was slowly sucking him into its depths. But Mounthead made no attempt to grasp the outstretched hand.

"Let me drown," he gasped faintly. "It is better so."

"Don't be a fool!" Terry cried roughly. "Another few seconds and it will be too late!"

"Time in which to make a confession —to solve a mystery," the other answered with a wan smile. "Listen! *Claude Delorme did not kill my wife!*"

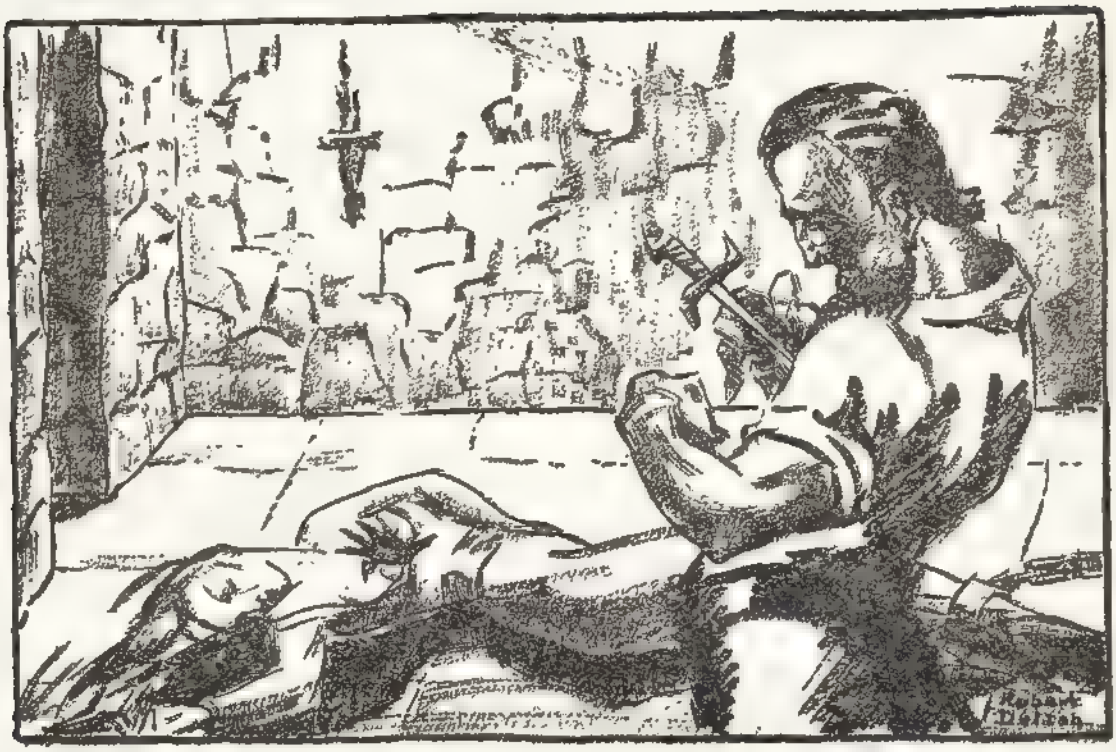
"How do you know that?" For a moment Terry thought the man's mind was wandering.

"That night I was listening at the communicating door between her boudoir and my room." The water was creeping up toward his chin as Mounthead spoke the hurried words. "I heard everything that passed. I was mad with fury when I realized that my wife's honor—even her liberty—was at the mercy of a rascally blackmailer. There is only one way of ensuring the silence of such a man as Delorme, and I resolved to take it. I entered the boudoir the moment the lights went out, snatched up the Egyptian dagger, and struck blindly. I aimed at Delorme, but in the darkness I stabbed the woman I was trying to save! She thought the blow came from Delorme—the man who had just been threatening her—and so she wrote the uncompleted message, trying to denounce her supposed slayer. . . . But it was I—God help me! I killed the woman I loved and was trying to save! . . . Thelma . . . forgive . . ."

He sagged forward as he spoke, and the dark waters of the marsh closed over his head. With his dying breath Lord Mounthead had drawn aside the baffling veil of mystery that until that moment had shrouded Thelma's tragic death in the dark.

[THE END]

"A knife ripped into his chest."



The Man With the Blue Beard

By HAROLD WARD

A grim story of a weird murder—a mystery story full of strange surprizes and vivid action

1. Lamontaine

LAMONTAINE, sweltering in his cubby-hole of an office, a jug of rum at his elbow, a book on the desk before him, gazed through the open window at the collection of shacks that composed the sleepy village of La Foubelle and cursed in his shaggy red beard. The sound of his rumbling voice awakened the green and yellow parrot, clinging to a perch beside him. It blinked its bleary eyes an instant, then shrieked noisily.

"Rum! Rum!" it croaked. *"Good Jamaica rum. Awr-r-r-rk!"*

Lamontaine filled a battered tin cup from the jug on the desk and lifted it to where the bird could reach it. The parrot

drove its hooked beak into the fiery liquor and, lifting its head, swallowed greedily.

"Rum!" it screamed. *"Jamaica rum! Hotter'n hell! . . . hotter'n hell!"*

Placing the cup to his own lips, Lamontaine doffed the contents at a gulp. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, he filled and lighted his pipe and turned back to his book.

He was a great hulk of a figure, this Doctor Hugo Lamontaine, soldier of fortune and dabbler in the occult—a man with the build of a Viking, his hair a brilliant auburn with a touch of gray above the temples, his whiskers a tangled red mass extending almost to his waist. He was clad in a pair of rusty white trousers, the suspenders hanging down over his hips, his bare feet thrust into aged, though comfortable, carpet slippers. His undershirt was unbuttoned at the neck, revealing a gorilla-like chest covered with sandy hair. His bare arms, thick as posts, hairy like those of an ape, ended in hands which, while massive like the rest of the man, were spatulate—the hands of an artist.

He was in La Foubelle for a purpose. Sleeping at the very edge of the fetid Louisiana swamp, its inhabitants still clung to the customs and superstitions of their ancestors. For three months he had remained there, surrounded by his books, his vials and his bottles, endearing himself to the natives, winning their confidence, delving deeply into their hyper-orthodoxies and beliefs. And now, his work not yet completed, the place was beginning to pall on him. He longed for action—for the crash of sabers, the smell of powder, the shouts of men. . . .

An asthmatic Ford came to a wheezing stop just outside the battered gate. Then the sound of hurried footsteps on the graveled walk.

"Hell! A patient!" Lamontaine growled to the parrot.

He laid his book down and glanced through the open window. Then he leaped to his feet, and hurling the litter of papers and magazines from the operating-table, gave it a quick shove into the center of the room. The parrot, drowsing, opened its filmy eyes and shrieked raucously:

"Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all;
Just pickle my bones in alcohol."

It ended its bacchanalian outburst with an ear-splitting *"Awr-r-r-rk"* as Pierre Le Front, the village constable, staggered through the open door, the form of an unconscious man in his arms. He deposited his burden on the table and turned to Lamontaine, his black eyes glittering with excitement.

"I fin' him far, far from here at ze edge of ze swamp," he explained hastily. "He has been in ze water and swam to shore. Zere was a track where he dragged heemself up ze bank. He ees a powerful man, doctaire, for he was mos' assuredly thrown into ze swamp to die. See?"

With a dramatic gesture, he jerked aside the shirt which clung soddenly to the unconscious man's chest. There was a vicious knife wound in it just over the heart.

Lamontaine was already at work cleansing and swabbing the wound. Even the illiterate native noted the extreme delicacy of his touch, the deftness of his spatulate fingers. Reaching for the tin cup on the desk, he emptied a bit of rum into it from the jug and, forcing the wounded man's mouth open, poured a small quantity between the bloodless lips.

The injured man choked, swallowed, then opened his eyes and glared at them wildly.

"The man with the blue beard!" he muttered thickly. "The man with the

blue beard! . . . de Laval! . . . Oh, Vera, don't you understand? . . ."

His voice died away in a low, gurgling moan. He closed his eyes again and sank back into unconsciousness.

Lamontaine turned to the constable.

"De Laval?" he questioned reminiscently. "Isn't there a family by that name somewhere in the vicinity?"

Constable Pierre Le Front crossed himself hastily.

"Five-ten mile from here, on ze peninsula, ees ze house of which you spik," he answered. "Eet ees old—so old zat eet has ze haunt—eet ees hexed. At night, sometimes, zere ees ze weird light in ze window or in ze forest around eet. Ze family, zey are dead."

His voice dropped to a low whisper.

"Eet was zere," he said in a low, awed tone, glancing around as if fearful of being overheard, "zat Jean La Fitte, ze pirate, haff hees headquarters when he was on ze mainland. Eet ees said zat he built ze ol' house an' zat he brought hees captives zere sometimes for ze torture. Eet ees zey who haunt ze place, wailing an' moaning, an' ze lights are carried by zem as zey search for ze gol' zat La Fitte stole from zem."

Lamontaine's red beard dropped to his chest and he laughed softly, the light of mischief dancing in his keen eyes.

"Poppycock!" he snapped. "La Fitte was a decent pirate—as pirates go. He didn't torture his victims."

Le Front shrugged his scrawny shoulders and crossed himself again.

"Every man to his own belief," he said finally.

LAMONTAINE stooped over the wounded man and, lifting him without apparent effort, carried him through the little door that led to the rear of the house where he had his living-quarters. Placing him upon the bed, he removed the sodden clothing and bandaged the wound.

The injured man opened his eyes and glared about wildly again. Then he babbled. Lamontaine ceased his labors and, bending his head until his long, red beard dragged upon the other's brawny chest, listened intently.

"Mon Dieu!" Le Front, who had followed the physician into the room, exclaimed. "What does he say?"

Lamontaine held up a warning finger. The wounded man babbled on. Finally he dropped into a troubled sleep.

"He will live," Lamontaine said quietly. "He needs sleep and rest now. Much sleep."

He walked to the medicine cabinet and mixed a potion.

"Get your nigger and come over and take care of him tonight," he growled, placing the glass on the table by the bed. "Give him a spoonful of this every two hours and a sip of rum if he wakes up."

Le Front looked at the big man inquiringly.

"And you?" he said.

Lamontaine was already pulling on his shoes and stockings. Stepping over to the table, he opened a drawer and, taking out a gun, twirled the well-oiled cylinder with eyes that glistened ominously.

"I'm going to investigate this haunted house of yours," he said quietly.

Le Front glanced apprehensively through the open window. The sun was slowly sinking, throwing long, grotesque shadows over the countryside. From the distance came the barking of a dog, the merry voices of children at play.

"Eet weel soon be night," he said, crossing himself again. "Wait until tomorrow, my fren', an' I weel go weeth you. But tonight—*mon Dieu!*"

Lamontaine, in the act of pulling on his shirt, grinned cheerfully. Filling the tin cup from the rum jug, he doffed its

contents, then tossed the cup to Le Front.

"Drink?" he inquired. "Jamaica rum. Good liquor hurts nobody."

Constable Le Front filled the container with fingers that trembled.

"At night," he said, half to himself. "You will go to zat place—at night?"

"When graveyards yawn and tombs give up their dead," Lamontaine misquoted lightly. "There's danger there, Le Front. The man's been stabbed, half killed. And it's danger that I crave right now. The devil's in me tonight, my friend. I must have excitement or—or I get drunk. . . ."

"Eet ees far bes' zat you get drunk," Le Front said sagely. "Zey may keel you, zese devils zat I tell you about."

"If I die, all that my humble abode contains is yours," Lamontaine chuckled.

The parrot, opening its eyes drowsily, shrieked raucously:

"Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all;
Just pickle my bones in alcohol. . . ."

It stopped its bacchanalian ribaldry and glared at its master sleepily.

"Rum!" it croaked. *"Good Jamaica rum. . . ."*

Lamontaine, his long, red beard resting against his broad chest, laughed rumblingly.

2. *In the Dark*

THERE was a touch of storm in the air as Lamontaine, walking, approached the old house on the peninsula. The moon was hidden by the black and swollen clouds; the night was very dark. He could just make out the outlines of the building through the trees as he approached it from the western side, the stagnant swamp into which the land jutted, surrounding it on the other three sides, drawing closer and closer with the passing of the years. Once, according to tradition, Lamontaine had heard, there had been no peninsula; the swamp had eaten into the land like a festering sore until now it was within a few hundred yards on either side.

There was something sinister and malignant about the pile of ancient masonry. Lamontaine sensed it as he stood there, his eyes attempting to pierce the gloom. He shuddered as if an icy hand had been pressed across his brow, and his fingers sought the butt of the gun that nestled in his coat pocket. Then he moved a bit closer, dodging from tree to tree and from bush to bush.

Even in the darkness he could note the peculiar construction of the building. It reminded him of a bat with wings outspread. As he drew closer he saw what caused the illusion; the main building reared itself like a tower, three stories in height. On either side was a wing, nestling close to the ground. Both wings appeared to have fallen into decay, the windows broken and boarded over, the crumbling walls covered with ivy and parasitic growths, the leaves of which tossed and shook with every vagrant breeze. The central portion, however, was apparently in good repair.

His inspection completed, he started forward again, only to come to a sudden stop with an exclamation of astonishment.

In one of the tiny basement windows appeared a light. It moved fitfully to another . . . stopped . . . moved on again as if carried by someone who halted occasionally. It was a strange light, elusive, flickering.

Lamontaine grew more cautious, his eyes never leaving the tumble-down house. Not a glimmer of light showed in any of its innumerable windows save that ghostly, shadowy flicker in the basement.

Again he stopped, rooted in his tracks. From somewhere in the house came a scream—a harrowing wail of terror. It was the voice of a woman.

Lamontaine darted forward. The scream was repeated. He snatched the gun from his pocket, and broke into a run.

His ankle came in contact with something that tripped him, hurling him to the ground. He struck upon his face, the gun falling from his hand. He sprang to his feet and groped about for the weapon. He finally found it in the tall, dank grass.

Then his inquisitive fingers touched something else. Stooping, he touched it again. He straightened up, his brows puckered thoughtfully.

It was a thin piano wire stretched almost knee-high. Holding it between his fingers, he followed it to a near-by tree; it ran through a staple fastened in the trunk and on to the next one.

It was the wire that had tripped him. He had no doubt that it extended from one side of the peninsula to the other. That it was connected with some sort of alarm within the house was apparent. The instant he came in contact with it, the scream had been abruptly cut off in the middle. He glanced quickly toward the old mansion. The subtle, lambent light was gone. The basement windows were as dark and eery as the remainder of the place.

Lamontaine moved forward cautiously again, his gun held ready for action. A movement among the bushes to the right arrested his attention. For an instant the moon came out from beneath the cloud; he caught a glimpse of a figure crouching in the shadows—of wolfish green eyes glaring at him malevolently.

Hugo Lamontaine was a man not given to fear; yet cold, stark panic swept over him now as the thing cowered in the darkness, ready to spring. He pulled the trigger of his gun. The flash showed him a wild, maniacal face, a tangled thatch of hair. Then it was upon him.

In spite of Lamontaine's tremendous strength, he was hurled to the ground by the smashing impact. The weapon was knocked from his hand. Muscular fingers sought his windpipe. His fist shot out at random, landing against flesh and bone with a crushing, smacking thud. The other grunted. Lamontaine, seizing the momentary advantage, hurled his adversary backward and leaped to his feet, the joy of battle surging through his veins.

There was a crackling of twigs as the thing crashed through the bushes a little distance away. Lamontaine lost a few seconds searching for his weapon. Finding it, he leaped in pursuit.

Only silence greeted his ears. The monster had disappeared.

Lamontaine stopped short and ran his fingers through his long beard in bewilderment. Brief though the flash of light from his gun had been, his quick eyes had noted the face of the man who had attacked him.

The other's tangled beard had been blue!

WALKING warily, putting his feet forward cautiously to avoid contact with other possible wires, Lamontaine approached the house. Somewhere within was a woman. He had heard her scream of terror, cut off suddenly in the middle as he touched the alarm wire. And, too, the wounded man had babbled of her. Who was she? And what was it that she feared? Lamontaine intended to find out.

He was within a dozen yards of the house when the front door was suddenly thrown open. A woman, holding a candle in her ivory-white hand, peered anxiously out into the darkness.

For a moment Lamontaine stood there, his gun covering the slender form of the girl—for girl she was—tall, bewitchingly beautiful. She was wrapped in a dressing-gown of some kind of fleecy material,

a twisted girdle about her waist which revealed every line of her perfect shape. The lighted candle, held aloft, showed the terror in her dark eyes, the delicate contour of her oval face.

Then, as her glance fell upon Lamontaine, she stepped forward a pace.

"For God's sake, leave!" she whispered hoarsely, her breast rising and falling with emotion. "There is danger——"

She stopped suddenly, glancing back over her shoulder apprehensively. The tall figure of a man appeared in the doorway beside her, blinking painfully as he peered out into the darkness.

"What is it, Vera?" he inquired. Then, as his glance fell upon Lamontaine, his face—dark, saturnine, emaciated—twisted with sudden emotion.

"God in heaven! A stranger—and armed!" he exclaimed. "I thought I heard the report of a gun a moment ago. Have you—have you been attacked?"

Lamontaine nodded grimly as he strode forward. The man appeared to be trembling with fear.

"And you, Vera? What in the name of heaven induced you to open the door?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"I—I heard a shot," she answered. "I——"

The thin man beckoned to Lamontaine imperiously.

"Come in!" he growled. "God knows that you are far from being welcome here. But I cannot allow you to remain outside exposed, as you are, to the most hellish danger. Come in. Perhaps we can make you comfortable until morning."

He extended his thin, muscular hand.

"I am Charles de Laval," he went on. "And this is my niece, Vera."

Lamontaine bowed gravely without taking the proffered hand. The man appeared not to notice the oversight. Taking the candle from the girl's trembling fingers, he stepped aside and allowed the newcomer to enter. The girl, standing back in the shadows—for the hallway was unlighted — whirled as de Laval turned to close and bolt the door.

"Go before it is too late!" she whispered hoarsely. "You are in danger—horrible danger. Oh! . . ."

Lamontaine spun on his heel as the girl screamed. A figure loomed beside him in the darkness—a man with tangled, matted hair and a shaggy blue beard.

He leaped backward, but too late. Something crashed against his head. He heard a peal of wild, malevolent laughter as he dropped to his knees. Again the blow descended. Then darkness enveloped him.

3. *Blood of Bluebeard*

CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Lamontaine slowly. He heard a voice calling to him from a great distance . . . someone was shaking him, begging him to wake up. His head was splitting. He raised his hand and felt of it gingerly. There was a lump on it the size of a walnut.

The effort brought on a spasm of pain. He dropped back with a little grimace.

"Wake up! Wake up!" the voice continued to implore.

Suddenly recollection swept over him. He opened his eyes with an effort. The girl was kneeling beside him, her face heavy with terror. There was a candle sticking in a rude sconce on the wall; its flame flickered lambently.

She was working at an iron shackle attached to his ankle. To the shackle was a chain, fastened to a staple set in the masonry. Her fingers trembled as she tried to insert the key in the lock. Finally she succeeded and the jaws sprang apart.

"Thank God! Thank God!" she exclaimed fervently. "And now you must

go—before he comes back—before I forget myself or he finds you——"

"Meaning—what?" Lamontaine demanded, raising himself to his elbow.

Her eyes dilated with terror.

"The man with—the blue beard," she said in an awed whisper. "It was he who attacked you. He is on friendly terms with—my uncle. Sometimes I—I wonder. . . ."

"Where is your uncle now?" Lamontaine asked.

"I—I do not know," she answered after a brief pause. "I think that he went outside to look after the alarm wire that you broke." Then, as if to change the subject: "You can go out the back way and, by skirting the edge of the swamp, avoid them."

Lamontaine pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. He was still dazed and groggy, but his head was clearing rapidly. He made out, in spite of the dimness of his prison, that he was inside a small, stone-lined room, windowless; the only opening was that through which the girl had entered. Another sharp twinge of pain shot through his head as he turned; he grimaced a bit and leaned against the wall for support. The girl watched him anxiously. Her eyes gazed into his own questioningly, the haunted look still on her face.

Finally she leaned forward and touched him on the arm.

"Please go!" she whispered again, her dark eyes glittering like those of a trapped animal. "Go before he attacks you—before the blood-lust comes to me again and I—I kill you."

"You?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"You cannot understand," she said. "Please go—send officers here. Tell them to take me—to lock me up. Tell them to pay no attention to what my uncle says—what I say or what I may do. Tell them to put me in a safe place—to keep me locked up so that I will harm no one else. . . ."

She buried her face in her hands in a fit of sobbing.

Lamontaine ran his fingers through his tangled red beard.

"You are Vera de Laval?" he questioned.

The girl shuddered at mention of the name.

"Yes—God help me!" she answered with a sudden show of passion. "And now, please go."

She turned her head away from him. Lamontaine touched her on the shoulder. She drew back almost angrily.

"Who is the man with the blue beard?" he demanded.

The girl laughed hysterically.

"Why you came here is beyond me," she exclaimed. "Nor have you told me who you are. In any event, you are a brave man thus to linger. Perhaps it will hasten your progress a bit if I tell you his identity."

She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Gilles de Laval!" she said.

Lamontaine took a step backward.

"Gilles de Laval!" he exclaimed. "Baron de Retz—the man who cannot die—the man who belongs to hell!"

She nodded.

"And I am of his hellish breed," she said bitterly. "His blood flows through my veins."

She was fumbling with the front of her dressing-gown. She tore it open, exposing to view two rounded white breasts. Between them and just above them was the mark of a hand—a blue hand, the fingers outspread.

"My heritage from the blue demon who was his wife," she went on, her voice vibrant with passion. "It was only a few weeks ago that I discovered it. I

was at school—in New Orleans. One morning a child was discovered dead close beside the convent walls. I had been depressed for several days before; the finding of the body seemed to fill me with a strange exhilaration. And, that morning, when I took my bath, I discovered—*this!*

"Yet I did not understand the meaning of the hellish thing and I—I was fearful of telling the Mother Superior about it. For I had never been informed of the awful heritage that had been passed on to me. But he—my uncle knew. That day he came to me after reading of the murder of the child. He told me the truth—revealed to me the damnable curse—the thing that has made our family an abomination throughout the centuries.

"This old house belonged to my father. It has been in the family for years. My uncle brought me here secretly—we slipped away from the convent unobserved. Here I have tried to fight the battle within myself. But in vain——"

Again she stopped and buried her face in her delicate hands.

"And you believe?"

"It is true—true, I tell you!" she said bitterly. "Again and again I feel the surge of his blood racing through my veins—I, who am a descendant of the offspring of that union between a demon from hell and Gilles de Laval. I have tried to throw it off. It is impossible. My uncle has succeeded in battling it down, but he has been unable to help me.

"I never know when it is coming on," she continued. "Nor can I remember afterward what has happened. I only know that, while I am sleeping, *he* gains possession of my body. Then I go forth and kill—rend—destroy. He followed us here, did Gilles de Laval, the better to gloat over me. . . ."

She stopped suddenly, a spasm of pain passing over her face.

"For God's sake, go!" she said quickly. "Again I feel it coming over me—the desire to kill. . . ."

LAMONTAINE, leaning against the wall, seemed to have lost the power of motion. His faculties were clear, but his head was a thing apart from his body . . . he was two separate entities.

The girl, too, was changing. She appeared to be growing—to lengthen out into unheard-of proportions. A mad, wild light was in her eyes. Her red lips were drawn back over her white teeth in a snarl of feline rage. She crouched almost on all fours, as if about to spring. Then she crept forward slowly. Her hand darted to her bosom. It came forth, a sharp-pointed dagger clasped in the slender white fingers. . . .

The blue patch that was upon her breast was sweeping upward. It covered her neck—crept over her face like a hideous mask, through which only her black eyes gleamed like those of a fiend from hell.

Ages passed. . . . From her breast crept other hands—blue hands. They surrounded her like an aura, dancing, gyrating. The air was filled with them. Through them Lamontaine dimly made out the slender form of the girl. Knife upraised, she was creeping stealthily toward him. He sought to avoid her. But his head—the head that was separated from his body—had no power to send the command to his laggard limbs. Yet he was not frightened. He reasoned with himself, watching her interestedly, the physician in him noting every fleeting change that came over her.

"Hashish!"

The word seemed to leap from his mouth in a solid chunk. Then it dissolved. . . . He saw the letters floating all around him. The blue hands caught

them in midair, tossing them about as a child toys with a gas-filled balloon.

He regained control of himself with an effort. His brain told him that somewhere in the room was a tiny vent through which the fumes of the burning drug were filtering. And he—he who had tasted the power of narcotics in every port of the Seven Seas—had allowed himself to become a victim to them.

He laughed harshly. The sound of his own voice startled him—made him angry at himself. With a mighty effort, he threw off the lethargy that was overpowering him. He was still dazed and bewildered, yet he knew that he had won.

The girl leaped. The knife swished through the air as Lamontaine side-stepped. It missed him by inches. He roared gleefully. Seizing her slender wrists, he gave a sharp twist. The weapon clattered to the stone floor.

She snarled angrily. The blue mask had dropped from her face, revealing features from which every particle of blood seemed to have drained. Her red lips were parted; from them flecked drops of bloody foam. She scratched at Lamontaine like an angry cat. He spun her around, twisting her arm behind her back. She screamed with passion as, holding her, he stooped and snapped the iron shackle about her slender ankle. She picked the knife from the floor and lunged at him again. He side-stepped out of reach until the chain brought her up with a sudden jerk.

A sudden premonition of danger swept over him. He whirled. Then a Berserker rage swept over him, fanned into flame by the drug that was still filtering through his brain.

Just outside the door, creeping toward him, knife in hand, was the man with the blue beard.

4. *A Dead Man*

LAMONTAINE charged like an angry bull. The man with the blue beard danced nimbly aside and threw the knife. It missed Lamontaine's head by a hair's breadth and embedded itself in the door-casing with a dull *plop*. Lamontaine jerked it out of the wood and leaped forward into the shadows where the other had disappeared. A door slammed in the distance. Then there was silence.

He turned back into the cell and picked up the candle. The girl looked up at him apathetically and said nothing. Her frenzy seemed to have disappeared, leaving her dulled and stupid.

Lamontaine grinned down at her.

"It's best to leave you as you are for the nonce," he told her. "As long as I've got the key to the shackles, you'll not be sticking me in the back."

He waited an instant for her to reply. Then, as she closed her eyes as if to sleep, he wended his way through the dark corridors and mounted a narrow flight of stairs which led upward to the door through which the blue-bearded revenant had disappeared.

He stopped, the hair rising on his head, the goose-pimples forming on his flesh. From the other side of the door came a scream of mortal terror—a harrowing wail of anguish followed by the sound of a fall. Then came a low, gurgling moan, a chuckle of wild, hellish laughter.

Lamontaine's shoulder crashed against the door, but it withstood his assault. There was a small landing at the top of the stairs. It gave him an opportunity to take a step backward and charge forward again. The impact of his huge bulk against the panels caused the ancient hinges to creak protestingly. But they held. For the third time he stepped back, stopping for an instant to listen.

Again that blood-curdling moan . . . the patter of running feet . . . a door closed softly somewhere in the distance. Then silence.

He hurled his body against the door once more. His feet slipped and he fell. His fingers came in contact with something sticky . . . something that smelled sweetish. The candle had dropped from his fingers and, extinguished, rolled down the steps. He groped in his pockets for a box of matches. Finding it, he struck one against the side of the box. It flared up for an instant . . . flickered . . . went out. . . .

Yet the momentary flare had been enough to show him that his hands were wet with blood; its dampness had extinguished the match.

Cursing in his beard, Lamontaine dried his hands on his trousers and, scratching a second match, located the candle at the bottom of the stairway. Picking it up, he relighted it and climbed the steps again.

The little landing was covered with blood. It was trickling under the door in a tiny crimson stream. He had stepped in it in his mad assault against the door and, stumbling, had smeared it on his hands.

The moaning had ceased. Lamontaine, holding the candle aloft, located the knob on the door and measured the distance between it and the edge of the stair-well with his eye. Placing his broad back against the wall, he stood on one foot; extending his other leg, he placed it against the knob and, bracing himself, gave a mighty heave.

The door shrieked as the screws tore through the ancient wood. Then it gave. Lamontaine caught himself in time to avoid a bad fall. Knife in hand, the candle held before him, he leaped through the opening.

He almost stumbled over the body of a man sprawled upon the bare, uncarpeted floor, arms outflung, the face buried in a pool of blood which was constantly growing larger.

He took a quick glance around. The room, which had evidently been used as a kitchen at some distant period, was unfurnished, the mildewed paper hanging from the walls in shreds, the rough board floor covered with dust, save where a pathway had been worn by feet from the door through which he had just emerged to another, now closed, at the other side.

In spite of his medical training, a feeling of repugnance swept over him as he knelt beside the still figure on the floor and, seizing it by the shoulder, rolled it over. A single glance was enough. The man's throat had been slit from ear to ear. The blood was still boiling through the severed jugular. He touched his hand to the chest. The heart had ceased to beat. Even as he gazed, the blood slowly coagulated . . . stopped flowing.

THE face, upturned to his, was that of a man of middle age, filled with a sort of low cunning, the mouth thick-lipped and weak. The eyes were wide open; over them the film of death had begun to form.

Lamontaine, about to rise to his feet, stopped suddenly, his keen eyes staring down at the clenched fist of the murdered man.

The dead fingers were twisted about a tuft of blue hair!

Lamontaine pulled himself to his feet, his brow pursed in thought; the words of Vera de Laval flashed kaleidoscopically through his brain. The man with the blue beard! Gilles de Laval—the Baron de Retz—the most infamous murderer of all time—the man who had married himself to a demon and wedded himself to hell!

It had been only a few days earlier

that Lamontaine, running through some of his books on demonology and witchcraft, had refreshed his memory on de Laval. Famous in the wars of Charles VII, the man had returned home, only to develop a streak of cruelty which led him to entice hundreds of innocent children to his castle. There, at the altar of Satan—for de Laval was a devil-worshipper—he had sacrificed them one by one, howling with glee at their shrieks, laving his hands in the blood that flowed from their tiny veins. . . .

One after another, his seven wives, too, had met with horrible deaths. Then love had come to him. He had led a beautiful Breton girl to the altar. At the last minute she had expostulated. De Retz, madly in love, had offered her all his possessions to go through with the ceremony. Still she refused. As a last resort, he had dropped to his knees and, seizing her slender white hands in his own cruel talons, had promised her his soul and body. She had accepted. The ceremony had been performed. And, at the altar, the bride had suddenly transformed herself into a beautiful blue demon—at least, such was the legend. Stretching forth her hand, she had touched his beard, changing it from a brilliant red to the blue of hell's smoldering embers, sealing him to the devil for ever—sending him forth a scourge upon the world.

Could it be that the girl spoke the truth—that de Laval was, as she had said, here in America? Was this house his habitat, its inhabitants members of his accursed brood? Lamontaine had delved too deeply in mystic lore to look at such stories askance. In many such tales there was more than a figment of the truth; not all of them were the imaginings of perverted brains.

Then he laughed harshly to himself.

"Ghosts do not need to resort to *hashish,*" he growled grimly.

The uncanny sensation of being watched crept over him. He turned. The room was empty, yet the feeling persisted. He knew that someone was peering at him through the dust-covered window.

He cleared the room at a bound. Jamming his palm beneath the sill, he gave a mighty heave. The window stuck. Finally it shot upward.

Something—a dark body that appeared to walk on all fours—dodged through the darkness to the shadow of a near-by bush.

Lamontaine turned and, picking up the candle, leaned out of the window. A vagrant breath of wind caused the flame to flicker, then suddenly leap high. A pace to the right a twig snapped. He turned his head.

He caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes gleaming at him with malignant ferocity—eyes that glared at him through a tangle of hair and matted blue beard.

Then the candle went out.

5. *The Only Way*

DROPPING the stub of the candle into his pocket, Lamontaine leaped through the open window and hurled his huge body at the ghastly thing that had peered up at him. His outstretched fingers touched only empty space. There was no noise, no movement. Yet the man with the blue beard had vanished, apparently melting into thin air.

Off to the right a dozen paces came a burst of wild laughter, then silence again, unbroken even by the rustling of the dry twigs.

Doctor Hugo Lamontaine was a man with an absolute disregard for danger. His brain was racing lightning-fast now, as he stood for an instant, his body tilted forward, peering through the darkness in the direction from which the sound came. Then a sudden idea flashed over him. Turning, he raced like a man possessed—

or frightened—in the direction of La Foubelle.

Close to the edge of the forest of stunted, moss-covered trees and scraggly bushes which surrounded the old house, Lamontaine came to a sudden stop. Crouching on his heels, he turned his head back in the direction from which he came. For a moment he listened intently. Satisfied that he had not been pursued, he skirted the edge of the forest and, dropping almost to all fours, dodged from tree to tree and from shadow to shadow until he reached the swamp. Following its course, he made a wide detour and, at the end of ten minutes, the ghostly old mansion loomed up before him again, black and sinister.

At the edge of the narrow clearing before the open window he stopped and listened again. Certain that he was not observed, he cleared the distance at a bound and pulled himself through the opening.

Back inside the bare room, he halted, his every faculty alert. Then he groped his way across to where the murdered man lay. The body had not been disturbed. He tiptoed across to the closed door and, laying his hand on the knob, turned it carefully. It opened noiselessly. He slid through. Closing the door behind him, he pressed his back against it and listened once more with bated breath. He heard no sound.

He felt in his pocket for the box of matches. Striking one, he relighted the candle and took a hurried glance around. He was inside the main part of the house. The room, though plainly furnished, showed evidence of female occupancy. On the other side was a second door. Lamontaine tiptoed across to it, negotiated another room and opened a door at the opposite side. He found himself at the foot of a flight of stairs leading upward. He climbed to the second floor. Here, hallways branched off in three directions, one to the right, one to the left and one straight ahead. The corridors were uncarpeted, showing every evidence of disuse. Yet as he gazed downward, he saw the prints of many feet in the dust. All led in the same direction—straight ahead.

Lamontaine followed them cautiously. They ended in front of a door at the end of the corridor. Hand on the knob, he stood listening, his eyes glancing narrowly at the row of closed doors on either side. Then he slowly opened the door and glanced inside.

The room was a huge one. All of the north wall had been torn out and replaced with windows, now boarded over. That it had been used as a studio at one time was apparent; a number of dust-covered pictures, several of them half finished, were scattered here and there against the walls.

A little to one side was a dresser. Piled high on it were jars of cold cream, grease paint, eyebrow pencils—all of the paraphernalia for hasty make-up.

On the wall just above the mirror was a picture. He stopped and examined it closely. It was the face of the man with the blue beard.

Lamontaine chuckled. He believed that he was beginning to see everything clearly now. Something about the painting—the way the flickering light from the candle struck it—appealed to him. He wet his finger with his tongue and rubbed it across a corner of the picture. It came away smeared with paint. Again and again he repeated the process until the marks of writing appeared to view.

He glanced at it curiously. Then, chuckling to himself, he cut the canvas from the frame and, folding it, placed it in his pocket.

Turning, he went down the stairway again, finally ending in the empty room where the dead man lay. The black, threatening clouds had turned into a fine,

misty rain. Extinguishing the candle, Lamontaine leaned out of the window and, opening the canvas, allowed the moisture to fall upon the picture. When it was thoroughly soaked, he wiped it off with his coat sleeve, repeating the process again and again. Satisfied, he folded it and placed it in his pocket once more.

Groping his way through the darkness, he stepped over the body of the murdered man and again entered the cellar. At the bottom of the narrow flight of stairs, he relighted the candle and negotiated the gloomy corridors until he reached the cell where he had confined the girl.

She appeared to be sleeping. He laid his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently. She opened her eyes and looked up at him dully, then dropped back into her lethargy.

Lamontaine placed the stub of the candle on the floor and, squatting beside it, spread open the canvas and studied its painted surface for a moment. He folded it again and stuck it inside his open shirt.

He released the shackle from the girl's ankle and stooped over once more. Placing his thumb to her eyelid, he pressed it back and gazed deeply into the dull eye. Satisfied that she was not drugged, he rose to his feet, cursing softly.

He was about to lift the form of the unconscious girl when again that sudden premonition of danger flashed over him. Straightening up, he took a step outside the door. A knife ripped into his chest. He staggered backward. Again he caught a glimpse of fiendish eyes glaring into his own.

Then he dropped with a little groan.

SOLDIER of fortune that he was, skilled in the rough-and-tumble school of fighting, his gigantic body a mass of scars received in conflicts all over the world, Lamontaine realized the advantage of taking an adversary off guard. Now as he sprawled on the floor, he lay quiet. His eyes were apparently closed. Yet his lids were raised sufficiently for him to peer under them as he furtively watched the other's every move.

For an instant the man with the blue beard seemed of two opinions. He stood over Lamontaine, his keen-edged knife upraised as if to strike again. Then, changing his mind, he turned away with a sinister chuckle and bent over the form of the unconscious girl, evidently convinced that his knife had struck true and that Lamontaine was dead.

A spasm of rage swept over Lamontaine as he noted what the monster was doing. Placing the knife in the girl's fingers, he wrapped them around the handle. For an instant, he stood gazing at her contemplatively. Satisfied with his diabolical handiwork, he straightened up and extended his long, bony hands toward her. She stirred uneasily. Rising unsteadily to her feet, she stared at the other with eyes filled with wonder and terror.

"For God's sake, what have I done?" she exclaimed excitedly.

She glanced at the knife in her hand. The weapon dropped from her nerveless fingers and she took a step backward, her slender hands pressed against her heaving breast.

Then she saw Lamontaine.

"Another?" she shrieked.

The man with the blue beard nodded.

"Upstairs—in the room at the head of the stairway—lies the body of a second man, his throat cut from ear to ear. There is blood—blood over everything. I heard a sound down here. I came down and found—him. You were bending over him, the knife in your hand. You killed him, just as you killed the others, fiend!"

The girl shuddered.

"Is he dead?" she asked dully.

"Quite dead," the man with the blue

beard responded coolly. "Vera, my kinswoman, this cannot go on. There is only one way out of it—one solution."

"Suicide," she muttered. She buried her face in her hands in a fit of sobbing. "First the man I loved. Now—these strangers."

For a moment there was silence. Then the man's bony fingers stole to his pocket. They came forth with a small phial filled with dark liquid.

"There is no other way," he said. "It is the way your father took to escape the curse. I will throw the bodies into the swamp, just as I disposed of—the other—the man you loved."

"Oh, God! Don't recall that horrible thing to me!" she screamed.

He looked at her sadly.

"My poor, poor girl," he whispered. "It is sad. Yet there is no other way out. Your father would have wished it."

She nodded dully, stifling her sobs.

"It is the only way," she said in an awed whisper. "Death. . . ."

The man with the blue beard extended the poison phial to her.

"It is tasteless," he said. "The same potion your father used. Its action is instantaneous."

She stretched forth her slender, white fingers. They closed about the bottle.

6. *Aaron Kronk*

THE fingers of Lamontaine's extended arm closed slowly about the chain. Now he suddenly hurled it. It wrapped around the ankle of the blue-bearded man. He gave a quick jerk. The other went down, his head striking against the stone floor with stunning force. Lamontaine snapped the shackle about the unconscious man's leg and leaped to his feet.

Vera de Laval screamed wildly. The bottle fell from her hand and smashed on the floor.

"You?" she exclaimed. "Not dead?"

Lamontaine pulled the folded picture from beneath his shirt and showed her the slash made by the knife.

"Thanks to the weight of the canvas, the force of the thrust was stopped and I received only a slight scratch," he told her. "Meanwhile, let us talk fast, Miss de Laval. We must be prepared to know where we stand before the devil on the floor recovers consciousness. There is much that is not yet clear to me. How long have you known this man who calls himself Charles de Laval?"

She looked at him queerly.

"As a matter of fact, only a few weeks," she said finally. "He came to me the day after the child was killed near the convent. He introduced himself and told me the horrible story of my heritage."

"Bosh!" Lamontaine snapped. "Likewise poppycock! And your father?"

"I knew him little better. My mother died when I was born. My father, who must have loved her dearly, took his bitterness out on me. I was raised by an old couple. He supplied the money for my care and, when they passed away, he had me placed in the convent. He seldom wrote to me—and then only from foreign ports. He apparently kept on the move a great deal. I never saw him."

"This young man who loves you?" Lamontaine interrupted.

A spasm of pain crossed her face.

"Dexter Ross," she said bitterly. "He was a young lawyer. We were—engaged. Do you wonder that I want to die after—what happened?"

"Rest easy on that score," Lamontaine growled. "Ross is alive and will recover."

The girl's eyes lit up with fresh hope.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Then I——"

"Didn't kill him? Of course you didn't," Lamontaine said kindly. "You didn't even touch him."

She staggered back a pace as from a blow.

"I—I don't understand you!"

"Of course you don't. Here's the story in a nutshell, Miss de Laval. Your father was, as you have probably surmised, a fairly wealthy man. Among his other holdings was this old house. Following your mother's death and your birth, he wandered over the face of the globe trying to forget his grief. He finally came here where he could be close to you. It was his intention to go to you, beg your forgiveness and become the father that he should have been long before.

"An artist to his finger-tips," Lamontaine went on, "he rigged up a studio in one of the upstairs rooms and occupied himself with his painting. His health was bad and he had grown more and more to rely on a man who served him as sort of a secretary and companion—a man named Aaron Kronk. To Kronk, your father told his plans. Kronk appeared to agree to them. In reality, given the handling of your father's money, he had embezzled a large part of it. The reunion of your father and yourself meant a show-down. And that was something Aaron Kronk did not want."

Gazing down at the form of the man on the floor, Lamontaine filled and lighted his battered brier thoughtfully.

"Kronk had been named the executor of your father's will," he finally went on. "With the assistance of a boon companion who served as your father's valet—a man named Wilkins, who had been an actor at one time—he poisoned your father. The latter learned of the hellish plot too late. There was no way for him to get away from here, guarded as he was by the two men. He had never left the house, and Kronk had worked on the superstitions of the natives hereabouts. They gave the old place a wide berth, thinking that it was haunted. So he could not get a letter out to you.

"Nevertheless, your father managed to leave word behind him before he went to the grave. He wrote it all down—the whole plot—on a bit of canvas. Over it, almost with his last breath, he painted a picture of Gilles de Laval, the bluebeard of the Breton legend. He knew that, of all the pictures he left behind, it would attract attention quicker than any of the others."

Spreading out the canvas, he showed the astonished girl the hastily written scrawl on the smooth surface.

"We have not the time to go into details," he went on. "Suffice to say that instead of oil paints, he used what is called *tempera*—an opaque water-color paste which can be removed with water. I accidentally discovered the picture in your father's old studio where Kronk, or Wilkins—whichever played the part of Bluebeard—used it as a model to make up by——"

"Which you will now hand over to me!"

Lamontaine whirled. The man with the blue beard was covering him with a revolver.

"Aaron Kronk!" Lamontaine exclaimed.

The other chuckled. The gun still menacing the physician, he half turned to the girl.

"Unlock the shackle!" he commanded.

She did as she was bidden. Kronk took a step backward until he stood in the doorway.

"The picture!" he snapped.

Lamontaine tossed the folded canvas to him. He caught it in midair.

"You are clever," he said with a sinister chuckle. "You surmised a great deal.

I will supply what you omitted, since you are both to die. I am a bit of a hypnotist; at one time Wilkins and I did a vaudeville act together. I implanted the idea in Vera's brain that there was a blue hand on her breast——"

"And, with the aid of hashish fumes, you did the same for me," Lamontaine growled. "You caused her to attack me, thinking that she would kill me. You were lurking just outside the door intending to awaken her after she had stabbed me—just as you called her out of her hypnotic state a moment ago after you had, as you thought, killed me."

The other nodded.

"When the time was ripe for me to tell her the story of Gilles de Laval—I got the idea from the picture her father painted, and the similarity of the name made it easy for me—she fell into my trap.

"I brought her here with the intention of killing her as I killed her father. Unfortunately for my plans, Wilkins fell in love with her and stayed my hand. So I continued the deception, keeping her under the influence of the hashish a great deal of the time—continually planting in her mind the thought that she was of the blood of Gilles de Laval, the monster. It was fairly safe here. We had the house 'bugged' to warn us should visitors come. You ran into one of the wires, and Wilkins, who was a bit cracked and delighted in prowling about the grounds in his disguise, attacked you. That was just after Vera, whom I had kept doped all day, went into the basement and found that her snooping lawyer-sweetheart was gone. You heard her scream.

"It's a mystery to me how he located her here," Kronk went on. "In some manner he learned the truth—or guessed it—and came here to warn her. Wilkins stabbed him before she had a chance to talk to him. I convinced her that she had killed him while in one of her supposed trances brought on by hashish. Later I threw the body into the swamp. I've had the handling of the de Laval money too long to give up without a fight."

"Nevertheless, the youngster got away and is now well on the way to recovery," Lamontaine said coolly.

"There are ways of getting him," Kronk snarled. "I had intended killing Vera tonight anyway. I've already killed Wilkins. It's he who has been playing the part of Bluebeard. He's been getting out of hand, demanding the girl and a share of the plunder, too. That's why you find me in disguise. I donned it after killing him."

He chuckled sinisterly.

"My plans are completed," he went on. "There will be four bodies in the smoldering ruins of the building when they make a search—if they ever do. For de Laval, too, is buried here—under the stones of this cellar. . . ."

He leaped backward and slammed the door. They heard the bolt shoot home.

Lamontaine hurled his bulk forward. The door withstood his assault. He stepped back to the other side of the room and, taking a run, leaped high into the air, driving his feet against the panels with the force of a catapult. It crashed outward as the bolt was torn from the wood.

He turned to the frightened girl.

"Come!" he said quickly, picking up the candle.

She took a step toward him. There was a dull roar. The house shook. The walls seemed to leap upward and then in at them, covering them with falling masonry and debris. . . . Smoke filled the cellar. . . .

PIERRE LE FRONT, the village constable, hovering over his patient in the rear of the doctor's bachelor quarters,

heard a roar like that of a wounded bull.

"Mon Dieu!" he ejaculated, leaping to his feet.

Lamontaine stood swaying in the doorway. His clothes hung in rags about his burly form. His face was a mass of contusions and burns, his eyebrows singed, his long, red beard shriveled by the heat to half its length. He was carrying the slender form of an unconscious girl. He limped painfully as he staggered across the room and laid her beside the man on the bed.

" 'Twill be a happy reunion when they awaken," he growled, half to himself. "Did you give him the medicine, Le Front—the medicine and the rum as I ordered?"

The wondering constable nodded.

"An' you, my fren'," he exclaimed. "Ees eet ze battle weeth ze ghost zat you have had?"

Lamontaine dropped into a chair and heaved a deep sigh.

"It was a wonderful fight!" he chuckled. "It kept me from getting drunk, Pierre. He got away. But, by heaven! I'll get him before I die! I swear it. And now get me some rum—Jamaica rum. Give the girl a spoonful, too."

The parrot swung on its perch and blinked owlishly.

"Awr-r-r-rk!" it croaked. *"Rum. Jamaica rum! Hotter'n hell! Hotter'n hell! Die! Die! Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all. . . ."*

Lamontaine leaned back in his chair and laughed, happily.

The Hedge

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

A quaint little story, about a gardener who spent his whole life clipping a hedge

PEOPLE came from miles around to see the wonderful hedge that encircled the great estate of Count Martell. In bloom, the hedge was a sight of almost unbelievable beauty — mile upon mile of gorgeous, flaming blossoms —and somewhere along those miles you would come upon a solitary man, industriously snip-snip-snipping, trimming the hedge with a precision and dexterity that bespoke years of practise.

The Count himself noticed the man one day as he drove along engrossed in a business problem. He could not be sure of the date, nor could his magnificently liveried chauffeur; so the car was stopped.

"Hi, there! What date is it?" the Count called.

The steady snip-snip ceased. The man glanced deliberately about him, at a rock, a tree, a mound across the road, as though seeking the answer in them. Then

he nodded. "The twenty-fifth of June, sir."

"Are you positive?"

"Quite sure, sir. I am always at this point on the twenty-fifth of June, sir."

"Always?"

"Always, sir."

"How long have you been doing this task?"

"Ever since I was able to do anything, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-five, sir."

"And how long does it take you to trim the entire hedge?"

"Exactly one year to go twice around, sir."

The Count's brows knitted ponderously. "You mean to say you spend your life going round and round this hedge, snipping and trimming, never catching up, never falling behind, never finishing your task?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Manuel Torro, sir."

"And you can even tell what day of the year it is by the hedge?" The Count frowned. "Well, I must not delay you, Manuel, or I may be delaying the passage of Time itself."

THE Count seemed strangely preoccupied during the rest of the day. Those with whom he transacted business remarked that he was getting absent-minded. He did not appear to hear some of the questions they asked, and his replies to others were vague or irrelevant, as though some profound problem monopolized his attention.

That night he awoke and rang for sedatives. "I had a horrible nightmare, Marquo," he said. "I dreamed I was clipping a hedge, and could not clip fast enough. It grew and grew about me, smothering me."

"It was the lobster salad, perhaps, sir."

"Perhaps."

But the following night it could not have been lobster salad, for none was served. The Count tossed restlessly all night, and rising early, called for the wage-roll. Having consulted it, he was driven along the road encircling his estate until he observed the lone figure snip-snipping at the hedge.

"Manuel Torro!" he called. "Come here. I am Count Martell. I own this hedge. Who hired you to clip it?"

"Well, sir, it is Count Martell who always pays my wages."

"There must be some mistake. I have consulted the records for many years back, and it is sixty years since my grandfather hired a Manuel Torro to clip this hedge. You are only thirty-five."

"That was my grandfather he hired, sir," Manuel replied unabashed.

"Then who hired you?"

"Well, sir, when my grandfather grew old and slow, my father helped him, doing more each day as my grandfather did less, until, when my grandfather died, my father was doing it all, and since his name was Manuel Torro, the wages were paid to him."

"And when your father grew old and slow?"

"I helped, sir, doing more as he did less, until when he died——"

"Yes, yes! And when you grow old and slow?"

"I have a son named Manuel, sir, who will help me."

The Count motioned the car on, then stared into vacancy as though visioning vistas of years down which innumerable Manuel Torros snip-snipped their way along that hedge, never catching up, never falling behind, but maintaining a pace inevitable as the passage of Time itself.

MUCH of the grief and unhappiness in this world is caused by our failure to appreciate the viewpoint of others. Manuel Torro loved his work. To tend and care for the hedge, so that it would blazon forth each year into exquisite beauty that people would come from far and near to see, was not a task so much as an honor, and he was filled with pride when people said: "See! There goes Manuel Torro, the hedge-clipper."

But to Count Martell, the thought of that interminable snip-snipping was intolerable. It irritated his mind as a sharp flint in his shoe would have irritated his foot. He saw in it only unending monotony.

That night he groaned and called out in his sleep until Marquo awakened him not once, but a dozen times, and always it was the same dream: a hedge that grew and grew, encompassing the Count and his battalions of Manuel Torros in spite of their frantic snipping, until it smothered them.

Long before dawn the Count was up and busy. "It must be put a stop to, Alexor!" he commanded his head gardener. "Have the hedge cut down completely. Have a stone wall built in its place."

Alexor stared with horrified eyes and raised protesting hands. Cut down the hedge? The glorious hedge that all the world made pilgrimage to see? That were sacrilege second only to the sacking of churches and the ravishing of holy things.

"Bring me an ax, Alexor."

With his own hands Count Martell razed the first yard of hedge. With his own hands he laid the first stone in the wall that was to take its place. Daily he urged the work forward until, after many months, not a branch or leaf of the hedge remained. In its place was a grim stone wall that would stand without care, without attention, throughout the ages.

For the first time in months, the Count slept well. In the morning he ordered a car and was driven in triumphant satisfaction around the wall that now encompassed his estate. But suddenly a startled command brought the car to a stop as he found himself staring at a familiar figure stooped beside the wall, snip-snipping away as though life depended upon it.

"What does this mean, Pietel?" he asked his chauffeur. "I told them to give this man other work. Why does he snip at a stone wall as though it were a hedge?"

"Didn't they tell you, sir?"

"Tell me? Tell me what?"

"Why, this hedge, sir! When he found them cutting it down, he went stark, staring crazy. They shut him up until he was quiet, and now he is loose, he——"

"Drive me home, Pietel! Don't sit there raving like a lunatic! Drive me home!"

IF YOU ever pass the estate of Count Martell, you may see Manuel Torro, now grown old and stooped, but still snip-snipping, working his endless way around the great wall. And if you ask concerning Count Martell, they may point to a window in the east tower and tell you that in that room a man goes round and round, year in and year out, snip-snipping away with stiff fingers at the flowers and leaves upon the wallpaper.

It is Count Martell.

Lead Soldiers

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

A strange doom closed round the Dictator who sought to achieve his destiny through a bloody war

"THEN there is no hope for peace?"

The smile that touched the lips of the man at the desk was only formal.

"None, gentlemen," he said quietly.

The members of the deputation looked at one another. Then their leader said, wetting his lips, "But surely mankind's development has progressed beyond the barbarous stage. Nations need no longer settle their disputes by war and bloodshed. We offer you arbitration——"

The man at the desk stood up. He was not tall, but he seemed to dwarf the others. His eyes, cold as quartz, swept from face to face.

"And I refuse it!" he snapped. "Gentlemen, why waste time? The quarrel between my nation and those others cannot be arbitrated. Our future destiny lies in expansion, in growth. Peace to us is stagnation, a slow death. We mean to grow, to take our place among the great world powers."

One hand, a stubby peasant's hand, pointed suddenly down.

"There is my arbitration, gentlemen," he said. "Tomorrow all the earth shall know of it!"

The faces of the deputation paled as they looked. Rank on rank of lead soldiers stood there on the top of the desk. A forest of little bayonets glinted in the dim light. Set faces, crudely painted, stared at them. So perfect was the illusion that it seemed an actual army that stood in serried, silent ranks. Waiting. . . .

The leader touched a handkerchief to his forehead.

"But," his voice rang hoarsely in the room, "but your people, sire. Think of your people. You cannot pretend that *they* seek this war. Why, they desert across your borders in such numbers that our customs guards cannot turn them back. We could hardly reach you tonight for the throngs that march with placards in the city's streets, crying 'No more war.' And hark! from this very room you can hear the chanting in the cathedral yonder, where men and women and children pray for a miracle that will halt this tragic, useless conflict. You alone force them on to fight. One little word from you and the crisis will be past. Oh, sire, in common humanity let us entreat you——"

"Stop!" the man at the desk ordered. His eyes gleamed with a reddish light. "You go too far! I have heard your protestations, gentlemen, with patience. But there is a limit. You may not judge my country's attitude by its deserters, its cowards, its weaklings! There are brave men here too, heroic men who know their country's destiny as I know it and who are willing to die that we may have our proper place in the sun. You shall judge my people's courage on the battlefield, gentlemen. You will find their ranks as unyielding as these!"

Again his hand swept down to point

at the dead-faced images that lined his desk.

The leader of the deputation took up his hat and stick. He seemed to have aged twenty years during the interview. His eyes were tired.

"Then—only a miracle can save mankind from this horror!" he said heavily.

The man at the desk regarded him unmoved.

"Only a miracle," he said with that formal smile. "Let us see, my dear sir, if it is vouchsafed!"

After the last man had filed past the cuirassed guards the man at the desk sat down again. His heavy features relaxed.

The fools! Thinking to turn him from his purpose with their silly phrases! Only diplomacy's iron rules had sealed his lips during their tedious tirade. "What would you, little men?" he had longed to shout at them. "Do you ask a volcano not to spew forth its ashes? Do you entreat a hurricane to halt its course of destruction? Then why imagine that you can halt my nation's course of empire with your little words and phrases?"

The man at the desk probed back along the path of his own life. They talked to him of peace—to him who had never known the meaning of the word; who had fought ever since he came into the world; fought Nature and her savage forces for very survival in his peasant childhood; then waded through the blood of opponents, battled mass indifference and mass hostility through his long rise to power. Had anyone ever offered *him* peace in those days? No! They had sought only to beat him down, to crush him as ruthlessly as one treads on a serpent. And now that he had won over them all; now that he was top dog—the Dictator facing a world to be conquered—these little fools thought that they could turn him from his goal with words. . . .

The chanting from the cathedral was louder now. It rang incessantly, eerily, in the heavy shadows of the room.

Something in the timbre of that chanting penetrated the man's revery. He found his fingers groping at the breast of his braided tunic, groping for a rosary that had not hung there in many, many years. The peasant in him, long held in check, stirred to that chanted prayer. That prayer for "a miracle to halt this horror!"

For just an instant there was a strange expression in the quartz-like eyes. They were praying, his people. Not only in that great cathedral but throughout the city, all over the land. In chapels, in meeting-houses, before crude little altars in thatched huts. Yes, and more. . . . The memories of his childhood stirred sluggishly. There were older gods among his people than the crucifix—dark beings, half forgotten, sought out only in times of great stress. . . . Were antiphonic chants rising now before the blackened altars of these Elder Ones? Were the fires lit on the druidic stones? Were the ancient sacrifices made?

For those prating men tonight had spoken simple truth. His people did not want wars and bloodshed and conquest. They were a simple, kindly folk. He alone, the Dictator, the man greater than a king—his lust for power alone could scourge them along this path to glory. Let anything happen to him and all the grim preparations, this martial clamoring, would pass like an evil dream. . . .

And then the man came back to reality suddenly. He smiled, an ugly smile. What nonsense was this? Let those fools hate him, let them pray and chant against him. What good would it do? What good would anything do? They could

not harm him. This lone, unguarded room was an impregnable fortress which none might enter without his sanction. And it was not alone the cuirassed guards on which he relied. The halls of this old ducal palace thronged with the purple shirts and arm-bands of his "Ballistæ". What man could pass them? The "Ballistæ," backbone of his power. Every man of them *his* man; pledged only to achieve his dreams, worshipping him as a god. The man who tried to reach him through those purple ranks would need a thousand lives.

Absently the man at the desk reached out among his papers, ruffled through them. He must put aside morbid fancies, get to work. There was much to be done before he could sign the declaration of war.

And then his body jerked suddenly. He cursed, drawing back his hand with violence. Blood stained the papers, the surface of the desk. Clumsy ox! His nerves must indeed be in sad shape, or else he would not have pricked himself so savagely on the bayonet of a lead soldier.

His eyes swept over the ranks of figures. They stared back at him with crudely painted faces, stood in silent, ordered lines.

Odd! His hands must have been busy among those figures while he sat in his revery. He had turned every one of them about! Those hundreds of little men still held their exact alinement, but they faced toward him instead of away from him now. A myriad little daubed faces ringed about him. Hundreds of little bayonets gleamed in the dim light.

With a grimace of distaste the man bent over his papers again. The figures did not matter. It was those papers that mattered. He must get to work. The declaration of war. . . .

He worked on there at the great desk, head bowed. The little gleaming figures faced him in ordered lines. It was strange how the light played tricks with those figures. They seemed almost to move. . . .

The chanting swelled louder in the great room. Incredibly loud and clear it seemed, so loud and clear that curious minor threnodies were audible in it; primal intonings and responses that might have come down from some strange, half-forgotten invocation from mankind's beginning.

The figures ringed about the man at the desk, hundreds of them. Their little faces were strangely alive in the dim light. . . .

* * * * *

FEW facts about the Dictator's suicide ever reached the world. Indeed, no one really cared about details. The world seized on the one fact that the Dictator was dead. The threat of a new World War was gone, and in the realization of that glorious news much was lost sight of. And after the revolution that swept the "Ballistæ" from power, it was, of course, too late for any inquiry.

Yet there was never any hint of foul play. The cuirassiers who found the Dictator dead at his desk had guarded his room against intruders all that night, and the purple-shirted hordes could only confirm their allegations of fidelity to duty.

But more than the mere testimony of his guards made certain that the leader's death was self-inflicted. For not even the "Ballistæ", bereft of their source of power, could dispute the facts, however much they might wish to. Enemies the Dictator might have had, but his enemies could not have killed him in the manner that he died.

For surely it is only a man's own hand that can thrust the bayonet of a toy soldier into his jugular vein!

Lukundoo*

By EDWARD LUCAS WHITE

"IT STANDS to reason," said Twombly, "that a man must accept the evidence of his own eyes, and when eyes and ears agree, there can be no doubt. He has to believe what he has both seen and heard."

"Not always," put in Singleton, softly.

Every man turned toward Singleton. Twombly was standing on the hearth-rug, his back to the grate, his legs spread out, with his habitual air of dominating the room. Singleton, as usual, was as much as possible effaced in a corner. But when Singleton spoke he said something. We faced him in that flattering spontaneity of expectant silence which invites utterance.

"I was thinking," he said, after an interval, "of something I both saw and heard in Africa."

Now, if there was one thing we had found impossible it had been to elicit from Singleton anything definite about his African experiences. As with the Alpinist in the story, who could tell only that he went up and came down, the sum of Singleton's revelations had been that he went there and came away. His words now riveted our attention at once. Twombly faded from the hearth-rug, but not one of us could ever recall having seen him go. The room readjusted itself, focused on Singleton, and there was some hasty and furtive lighting of fresh cigars. Singleton lit one also, but it went out immediately, and he never relit it.

WE WERE in the Great Forest, exploring for pigmies. Van Rieten had a theory that the dwarfs found by Stanley and others were a mere cross-breed between ordinary negroes and the real pigmies. He hoped to discover a race of men three feet tall at most, or shorter. We had found no trace of any such beings.

Natives were few; game scarce; food, except game, there was none; and the deepest, dankest, drippingest forest all about. We were the only novelty in the country, no native we met had even seen a white man before, most had never heard of white men. All of a sudden, late one afternoon, there came into our camp an Englishman, and pretty well used up he was, too. We had heard no rumor of him; he had not only heard of us but had

* From WEIRD TALES for November, 1925.

made an amazing five-day march to reach us. His guide and two bearers were nearly as done up as he. Even though he was in tatters and had five days' beard, you could see he was naturally dapper and neat and the sort of man to shave daily. He was small, but wiry. His face was the sort of British face from which emotion has been so carefully banished that a foreigner is apt to think the wearer of the face incapable of any sort of feeling; the kind of face which, if it has any expression at all, expresses principally the resolution to go through the world decorously, without annoying or intruding upon anyone.

His name was Etcham. He introduced himself modestly, and ate with us so deliberately that we should never have suspected, if our bearers had not had it from his bearer, that he had had but three meals in the five days, and those small. After we had lit up he told us why he had come.

"My chief is ve'y seedy," he said between puffs. "He is bound to go out if he keeps this way. I thought perhaps . . ."

He spoke quietly in a soft, even tone, but I could see little beads of sweat oozing out on his upper lip under his stubby mustache, and there was a tingle of repressed emotion in his tone, a veiled eagerness in his eye, a palpitating inward solicitude in his demeanor that moved me at once. Van Rieten had no sentiment in him; if he was moved he did not show it. But he listened. I was surprized at that. He was just the man to refuse at once. But he listened to Etcham's halting, diffident hints. He even asked questions.

"Who is your chief?"

"Stone," Etcham lisped.

That electrified both of us.

"Ralph Stone?" we ejaculated together.

Etcham nodded.

For some minutes Van Rieten and I were silent. Van Rieten had never seen him, but I had been a classmate of Stone's, and Van Rieten and I had discussed him over many a campfire. We had heard of him two years before, south of Luebo in the Balunda country, which had been ringing with his theatrical strife against a Balunda witch-doctor, ending in the sorcerer's complete discomfiture and the abasement of his tribe before Stone. They had even broken the fetish-man's whistle and given Stone the pieces. It had been like the triumph of Elijah over the prophets of Baal, only more real to the Balunda.

We had thought of Stone as far off, if still in Africa at all, and here he turned up ahead of us and probably forestalling our quest.

ETCHAM'S naming of Stone brought back to us all his tantalizing story, his fascinating parents, their tragic death; the brilliance of his college days; the dazzle of his millions; the promise of his young manhood; his wide notoriety, so nearly real fame; his romantic elopement with the meteoric authoress whose sudden cascade of fiction had made her so great a name so young, whose beauty and charm were so much heralded; the frightful scandal of the breach-of-promise suit that followed; his bride's devotion through it all; their sudden quarrel after it was all over; their divorce; the too much advertised announcement of his approaching marriage to the plaintiff in the breach-of-promise suit; his precipitate remarriage to his divorced bride; their second quarrel and second divorce; his departure from his native land; his advent in the dark continent. The sense of all this rushed over me, and I believe Van Rieten felt it, too, as he sat silent.

Then he asked:

"Where is Werner?"

"Dead," said Etcham. "He died before I joined Stone."

"You were not with Stone above Luebo?"

"No," said Etcham. "I joined him at Stanley Falls."

"Who is with him?" Van Rieten asked.

"Only his Zanzibar servants and the bearers," Etcham replied.

"What sort of bearers?" Van Rieten demanded.

"Mang-Battu men," Etcham responded simply.

Now that impressed both Van Rieten and myself greatly. It bore out Stone's reputation as a notable leader of men. For up to that time no one had been able to use Mang-Battu as bearers outside of their own country, or to hold them for long or difficult expeditions.

"Were you long among the Mang-Battu?" was Van Rieten's next question.

"Some weeks," said Etcham. "Stone was interested in them and made up a fair-sized vocabulary of their words and phrases. He had a theory that they are an offshoot of the Balunda and he found much confirmation in their customs."

"What do you live on?" Van Rieten inquired.

"Game mostly," Etcham lisped.

"How long has Stone been laid up?" Van Rieten next asked.

"More than a month," Etcham answered.

"And you have been hunting for the camp!" Van Rieten exclaimed.

Etcham's face, burnt and flayed as it was, showed a flush.

"I missed some easy shots," he admitted ruefully. "I've not felt ve'y fit myself."

"What's the matter with your chief?" Van Rieten inquired.

"Something like carbuncles," Etcham replied.

"He ought to get over a carbuncle or two," Van Rieten declared.

"They are not carbuncles," Etcham explained. "Nor one or two. He has had dozens, sometimes five at once. If they had been carbuncles he would have been dead long ago. But in some ways they are not so bad, though in others they are worse."

"How do you mean?" Van Rieten queried.

"Well," Etcham hesitated, "they do not seem to inflame so deep nor so wide as carbuncles, nor to be so painful, nor to cause so much fever. But then they seem to be part of a disease that affects his mind. He let me help him dress the first, but the others he has hidden most carefully, from me and from the men. He keeps his tent when they puff up, and will not let me change the dressings or be with him at all."

"Have you plenty of dressings?" Van Rieten asked.

"We have some," said Etcham doubtfully. "But he won't use them; he washes out the dressings and uses them over and over."

"How is he treating the swellings?" Van Rieten inquired.

"He slices them off clear down to flesh level, with his razor."

"What!" Van Rieten shouted.

Etcham made no answer but looked him steadily in the eyes.

"I beg pardon," Van Rieten hastened to say. "You startled me. They can't be carbuncles. He'd have been dead long ago."

"I thought I had said they are not carbuncles," Etcham lisped.

"But the man must be crazy!" Van Rieten exclaimed.

"Just so," said Etcham. "He is beyond my advice or control."

"How many has he treated that way?" Van Rieten demanded.

"Two, to my knowledge," Etcham said.

"Two?" Van Rieten queried.

Etcham flushed again.

"I saw him," he confessed, "through a crack in the hut. I felt impelled to keep a watch on him, as if he was not responsible."

"I should think not," Van Rieten agreed. "And you saw him do that twice?"

"I conjecture," said Etcham, "that he did the like with all the rest."

"How many has he had?" Van Rieten asked.

"Dozens," Etcham lisped.

"Does he eat?" Van Rieten inquired.

"Like a wolf," said Etcham. "More than any two bearers."

"Can he walk?" Van Rieten asked.

"He crawls a bit, groaning," said Etcham simply.

"Little fever, you say," Van Rieten ruminated.

"Enough and too much," Etcham declared.

"Has he been delirious?" Van Rieten asked.

"Only twice," Etcham replied; "once when the first swelling broke, and once later. He would not let anyone come near him then. But we could hear him talking, talking steadily, and it scared the natives."

"Was he talking their patter in delirium?" Van Rieten demanded.

"No," said Etcham, "but he was talking some similar lingo. Hamed Burghash said he was talking Balunda. I know too little Balunda. I do not learn languages readily. Stone learned more Mang-Battu in a week than I should have learned in a year. But I seemed to hear words like Mang-Battu words. Anyhow the Mang-Battu bearers were scared."

"Scared?" Van Rieten repeated, questioningly.

"So were the Zanzibar men, even Hamed Burghash, and so was I," said Etcham, "only for a different reason. He talked in two voices."

"In two voices," Van Rieten reflected.

"Yes," said Etcham, more excitedly than he had yet spoken. "In two voices, like a conversation. One was his own, one a small, thin, bleaty voice like nothing I ever heard. I seemed to make out, among the sounds the deep voice made, something like Mang-Battu words I knew, as *nedru, metebaba,* and *nedo,* their terms for 'head', 'shoulder', 'thigh', and perhaps *kudra* and *nekere* ('speak' and 'whistle'); and among the noises of the shrill voice *matomipa, angunzi,* and *kamomami* ('kill', 'death', and 'hate'). Hamed Burghash said he also heard those words. He knew Mang-Battu far better than I."

"What did the bearers say?" Van Rieten asked.

"They said, *'Lukundoo, Lukundoo!'* " Etcham replied. "I did not know that word; Hamed Burghash said it was Mang-Battu for 'leopard'."

"It's Mang-Battu for 'conjuring'," said Van Rieten.

"I don't wonder they thought so," said Etcham. "It was enough to make one believe in enchantment to listen to those two voices."

"One voice answering the other?" Van Rieten asked perfunctorily.

Etcham's face went gray under his tan.

"Sometimes both at once," he answered huskily.

"Both at once!" Van Rieten ejaculated.

"It sounded that way to the men, too," said Etcham. "And that was not all."

He stopped and looked helplessly at us for a moment.

"Could a man talk and whistle at the same time?" he asked.

"How do you mean?" Van Rieten queried.

"We could hear Stone talking away, his big, deep-chested baritone rumbling along, and through it all we could hear a high, shrill whistle, the oddest, wheezy

sound. You know, no matter how shrilly a grown man may whistle, the note has a different quality from the whistle of a boy or a woman or litttle girl. They sound more treble, somehow. Well, if you can imagine the smallest girl who could whistle keeping it up tunelessly right along, that whistle was like that, only even more piercing, and it sounded right through Stone's bass tones."

"And you didn't go to him?" Van Rieten cried.

"He is not given to threats," Etcham disclaimed. "But he had threatened, not volubly, nor like a sick man, but quietly and firmly, that if any man of us (he lumped me in with the men) came near him while he was in his trouble, that man should die. And it was not so much his words as his manner. It was like a monarch commanding respected privacy for a death-bed. One simply could not transgress."

"I see," said Van Rieten shortly.

"He's ve'y seedy," Etcham repeated helplessly. "I thought perhaps . . ."

His absorbing affection for Stone, his real love for him, shone out through his envelope of conventional training. Worship of Stone was plainly his master passion.

Like many competent men, Van Rieten had a streak of hard selfishness in him. It came to the surface then. He said we carried our lives in our hands from day to day just as genuinely as Stone; that he did not forget the ties of blood and calling between any two explorers, but that there was no sense in imperiling one party for a very problematical benefit to a man probably beyond any help; that it was enough of a task to hunt for one party; that if two were united, providing food would be more than doubly difficult; that the risk of starvation was too great. Deflecting our march seven full days' journey (he complimented Etcham on his marching powers) might ruin our expedition entirely.

VAN RIETEN had logic on his side and he had a way with him. Etcham sat there apologetic and deferential, like a fourth-form school boy before a head master. Van Rieten wound up.

"I am after pigmies, at the risk of my life. After pigmies I go."

"Perhaps, then, these will interest you," said Etcham, very quietly.

He took two objects out of the side pocket of his blouse, and handed them to Van Rieten. They were round, bigger than big plums, and smaller than small peaches, about the right size to enclose in an average hand. They were black, and at first I did not see what they were.

"Pigmies!" Van Rieten exclaimed. "Pigmies, indeed! Why, they wouldn't be two feet high! Do you mean to claim that these are adult heads?"

"I claim nothing," Etcham answered evenly. "You can see for yourself."

Van Rieten passed one of the heads to me. The sun was just setting and I examined it closely. A dried head it was, perfectly preserved, and the flesh as hard as Argentine jerked beef. A bit of a vertebra stuck out where the muscles of the vanished neck had shriveled into folds. The puny chin was sharp on a projecting jaw, the minute teeth white and even between the retracted lips; the tiny nose was flat, the little forehead retreating; there were inconsiderable clumps of stunted wool on the Lilliputian cranium. There was nothing babyish, childish or youthful about the head; rather it was mature to senility.

"Where did these come from?" Van Rieten inquired.

"I do not know," Etcham replied precisely. "I found them among Stone's effects while rummaging for medicines or drugs or anything that could help me to

help him. I do not know where he got them. But I'll swear he did not have them when we entered this district."

"Are you sure?" Van Rieten queried, his eyes big and fixed on Etcham's.

"Ve'y sure," lisped Etcham.

"But how could he have come by them without your knowledge?" Van Rieten demurred.

"Sometimes we were apart ten days at a time hunting," said Etcham. "Stone is not a talking man. He gave me no account of his doings, and Hamed Burghash keeps a still tongue and a tight hold on the men."

"You have examined these heads?" Van Rieten asked.

"Minutely," said Etcham.

Van Rieten took out his notebook. He was a methodical chap. He tore out a leaf, folded it and divided it equally into three pieces. He gave one to me and one to Etcham.

"Just for a test of my impressions," he said, "I want each of us to write separately just what he is most reminded of by these heads. Then I want to compare the writings."

I handed Etcham a pencil and he wrote. Then he handed the pencil back to me and I wrote.

"Read the three," said Van Rieten, handing me his piece.

Van Rieten had written:

"An old Balunda witch-doctor."

Etcham had written:

"An old Mang-Battu fetish-man."

I had written:

"An old Katongo magician."

"There!" Van Rieten exclaimed. "Look at that! There is nothing Wagabi or Batwa or Wambuttu or Wabotu about these heads. Nor anything pigmy either."

"I thought as much," said Etcham.

"And you say he did not have them before?"

"Of a certainty he did not," Etcham asserted.

"It is worth following up," said Van Rieten. "I'll go with you. And first of all, I'll do my best to save Stone."

He put out his hand and Etcham clasped it silently. He was grateful all over.

NOTHING but Etcham's fever of solicitude could have taken him in five days over the track. It took him eight days to retrace with full knowledge of it and our party to help. We could not have done it in seven, and Etcham urged us on, in a repressed fury of anxiety, no mere fever of duty to his chief, but a real ardor of devotion, a glow of personal adoration for Stone which blazed under his dry conventional exterior and showed in spite of him.

We found Stone well cared for. Etcham had seen to a good, high thorn *zdreeba* round the camp, the huts were well built and thatched and Stone's was as good as their resources would permit. Hamed Burghash was not named after two Seyyids for nothing. He had in him the making of a sultan. He had kept the Mang-Battu together, not a man had slipped off, and he had kept them in order. Also he was a deft nurse and a faithful servant.

The two other Zanzibaris had done some creditable hunting. Though all were hungry, the camp was far from starvation.

Stone was on a canvas cot and there was a sort of collapsible camp-stool-table, like a Turkish tabouret, by the cot. It had a water-bottle and some vials on it and Stone's watch, also his razor in its case.

Stone was clean and not emaciated, but he was far gone; not unconscious, but in

(Please turn to page 774)

COMING NEXT MONTH

JIREL stiffened, one hand halting in a futile reach after the knife that no longer swung at her side; for among the trees a figure was approaching.

It was a woman—or could it be? White as leprosy against the blackness of the trees, with a whiteness that no shadows touched, so that she seemed like some creature out of another world reflected in dazzling pallor upon the background of the dark, she paced slowly forward. She was thin—deathly thin, and wrapped in a white robe like a winding-sheet. The black hair lay upon her shoulders as snakes might lie.

But it was her face that caught Jirel's eyes and sent a chill of sheer terror down her back. It was the face of Death itself, a skull across which the white, white flesh was tightly drawn. And yet it was not without a certain stark beauty of its own, the beauty of bone so finely formed that even in its death's-head nakedness it was lovely.

There was no color upon that face anywhere. White-lipped, eyes shadowed, the creature approached with a leisured swaying of the long robe, a leisured swinging of the long black hair lying in snake-strands across the thin white shoulders. And the nearer the—the woman?—came the more queerly apart from the land about her she seemed. Bone-white, untouched by any shadow save in the sockets of her eyes, she was shockingly detached from even the darkness of the air. Not all of the dark land's dim, color-veiling atmosphere could mask the staring whiteness of her, almost blinding in its unshadowed purity. . . .

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Lukundoo

(Continued from page 772)

a daze; past commanding or resisting any one. He did not seem to see us enter or to know we were there. I should have recognized him anywhere. His boyish dash and grace had vanished utterly, of course. But his head had grown more leonine; his hair was still abundant, yellow and wavy; the close, crisped blond beard he had grown during his illness did not alter him. He was big and big-chested yet. His eyes were dull and he mumbled and babbled mere meaningless syllables, not words.

Etcham helped Van Rieten to uncover him and look him over. He was in good muscle for a man so long bed-ridden. There were no scars on him except about his knees, shoulders and chest. On each knee and above it he had a full score of roundish cicatrices, and a dozen or more on each shoulder, all in front. Two or three were open wounds and four or five barely healed. He had no fresh swellings except two, one on each side, on his pectoral muscles, the one on the left being higher up and farther out than the other. They did not look like boils or carbuncles, but as if something blunt and hard were being pushed up through the fairly healthy flesh and skin, not much inflamed.

"I should not lance those," said Van Rieten, and Etcham assented.

They made Stone as comfortable as they could, and just before sunset we looked in at him again. He was lying on his back, and his chest showed big and massive yet, but he lay as if in a stupor. We left Etcham with him and went into the next hut, which Etcham had resigned to us. The jungle noises were no different there than anywhere else for months past, and I was soon fast asleep.

Sometime in the pitch dark I found myself awake and listening. I could hear two voices, one Stone's, the other sibilant and wheezy. I knew Stone's voice after all the years that had passed since I heard it last. The other was like nothing I remembered. It had less volume than the wail of a new-born baby, yet there was an insistent carrying power to it, like the shrilling of an insect. As I listened I heard Van Rieten breathing near me in the dark; then he heard me and realized that I was listening, too. Like Etcham I knew little Balunda, but I could make out a word or two. The voices alternated with intervals of silence between.

Then suddenly both sounded at once and fast, Stone's baritone basso, full as if he were in perfect health, and that incredible stridulous falsetto, both jabbering at once like the voices of two people quarreling and trying to talk each other down.

"I can't stand this," said Van Rieten. "Let's have a look at him."

He had one of those cylindrical electric night-candles. He fumbled about for it, touched the button and beckoned me to come with him. Outside of the hut he motioned me to stand still, and turned off the light, as if seeing made listening difficult.

Except for a faint glow from the embers of the bearers' fire we were in complete darkness; little starlight struggled through the trees, the river made but a faint murmur. We could hear the two voices together, and then suddenly the creaking voice changed into a razor-edged, slicing whistle, indescribably cutting, continuing right through Stone's grumbling torrent of croaking words.

"Good God!" exclaimed Van Rieten.

Abruptly he turned on the light.

We found Etcham utterly asleep, exhausted by his long anxiety and the ex-

ertions of his phenomenal march and relaxed completely now that the load was in a sense shifted from his shoulders to Van Rieten's. Even the light on his face did not wake him.

The whistle had ceased and the two voices now sounded together. Both came from Stone's cot, where the concentrated white ray showed him lying just as we had left him, except that he had tossed his arms above his head and had torn the coverings and bandages from his chest.

The swelling on his right breast had broken. Van Rieten aimed the center line of the light at it and we saw it plainly. From his flesh, grown out of it, there protruded a head, a head like the dried specimens Etcham had shown us, as if it were a miniature of the head of a Balunda fetish-man. It was black, shining black as the blackest African skin; it rolled the whites of its wicked, wee eyes and showed its microscopic teeth between lips repulsively negroid in their red fullness, even in so diminutive a face. It had crisp, fuzzy wool on its manikin skull, it turned malignantly from side to side and chittered incessantly in that inconceivable falsetto. Stone babbled brokenly against its patter.

Van Rieten turned from Stone and waked Etcham, with some difficulty. When he was awake and saw it all, Etcham stared and said not one word.

"You saw him slice off two swellings?" Van Rieten asked.

Etcham nodded, choking.

"Did he bleed much?" Van Rieten demanded.

"Ve'y little," Etcham replied.

"You hold his arms," said Van Rieten to Etcham.

He took up Stone's razor and handed me the light. Stone showed no sign of seeing the light or of knowing we were

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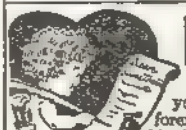

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there. But the little head mewled and screeched at us.

Van Rieten's hand was steady, and the sweep of the razor even and true. Stone bled amazingly little and Van Rieten dressed the wound as if it had been a bruise or scrape.

Stone had stopped talking the instant the excrescent head was severed. Van Rieten did all that could be done for Stone and then fairly grabbed the light from me. Snatching up a gun he scanned the ground by the cot and brought the butt down once and twice, viciously.

We went back to our hut, but I doubt if I slept.

NEXT day, near noon, in broad daylight, we heard the two voices from Stone's hut. We found Etcham dropped asleep by his charge. The swelling on the left had broken, and just such another head was there mewling and spluttering. Etcham woke up and the three of us stood there and glared. Stone interjected hoarse vocables into the tinkling gurgle of the portent's utterance.

Van Rieten stepped forward, took up Stone's razor and knelt down by the cot. The atomy of a head squealed a wheezy snarl at him.

Then suddenly Stone spoke English.

"Who are you with my razor?"

Van Rieten started back and stood up.

Stone's eyes were clear now and bright; they roved about the hut.

"The end," he said; "I recognize the end. I seem to see Etcham, as if in life. But Singleton! Ah, Singleton! Ghosts of my boyhood come to watch me pass! And you, strange specter with the black beard, and my razor! Aroint ye all!"

"I'm no ghost, Stone," I managed to say. "I'm alive. So are Etcham and Van Rieten. We are here to help you."

"Van Rieten!" he exclaimed. "My work passes on to a better man. Luck go with you, Van Rieten."

Van Rieten went nearer to him.

"Just hold still a moment, old man," he said soothingly. "It will be only one twinge."

"I've held still for many such twinges," Stone answered quite distinctly. "Let me be. Let me die my own way. The hydra was nothing to this. You can cut off ten, a hundred, a thousand heads, but the curse you can not cut off, or take off. What's soaked into the bone won't come out of the flesh, any more than what's bred there. Don't hack me any more. Promise!"

His voice had all the old commanding tone of his boyhood and it swayed Van Rieten as it always had swayed everybody.

"I promise," said Van Rieten.

Almost as he said the words Stone's eyes filmed again.

Then we three sat about Stone and watched that hideous, gibbering prodigy grow up out of Stone's flesh, till two horrid, spindling little black arms disengaged themselves. The infinitesimal nails were perfect to the barely perceptible moon at the quick; the pink spot on the palm was horridly natural. The arms gesticulated and the right plucked toward Stone's blond beard.

"I can't stand this," Van Rieten exclaimed and took up the razor again.

Instantly Stone's eyes opened, hard and glittering.

"Van Rieten break his word?" he enunciated slowly. "Never!"

"But we must help you," Van Rieten gasped.

"I am past all help and all hurting," said Stone. "This is my hour. This curse is not put on me; it grew out of me, like this horror here. Even now I go."

His eyes closed and we stood helpless, the adherent figure spouting shrill sentences.

In a moment Stone spoke again.

"You speak all tongues?" he asked thickly.

And the emergent manikin replied in sudden English:

"Yea, verily, all that you speak," putting out its microscopic tongue, writhing its lips and wagging its head from side to side. We could see the thready ribs on its exiguous flanks heave as if the thing breathed.

"Has she forgiven me?" Stone asked in a muffled strangle.

"Not while the moss hangs from the cypresses," the head squeaked, "not while the stars shine on Lake Pontchartrain will she forgive."

And then Stone, all with one motion, wrenched himself over on his side. The next instant he was dead.

When Singleton's voice ceased, the room was hushed for a space. We could hear each other breathing. Twombly, the tactless, broke the silence.

"I presume," he said, "you cut off the little manikin and brought it home in alcohol."

Singleton turned on him a stern countenance.

"We buried Stone," he said, "unmutilated as he died."

"But," said the unconscionable Twombly, "the whole thing is incredible."

Singleton stiffened.

"I did not expect you to believe it," he said; "I began by saying that although I heard and saw it, when I look back on it I can not credit it myself."

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THE pages of this magazine belong to you, the readers; for without your approval it could not continue to prosper. It is for that reason that this department, the Eyrie, is printed in each issue. It gives you a place where you may interchange views and tell us, and yourselves as well, just what is the matter with WEIRD TALES. Few of you realize the care with which your letters are read, and their contents digested by the editorial stomach. Many times your criticisms are the subject of office conferences. We want you to make use of the Eyrie, and let us know not only which stories you like best, but also which ones you dislike, and why. Only thus can we keep the magazine as you best like it.

Orchids for the October Issue

Robert Leonard Russell, of Mount Vernon, Illinois, writes: "Thanks for the swellest issue in a long time—the October one. It was plenty good, cover, drawings, stories and all. I liked the cover immensely, even though it was not true to the story. *The Six Sleepers*—the girl should have been a brunette and the beast should have been part man and part wolf rather than all wolf, but neither of these errors detracted much from my enjoyment of both cover and story. I got a real thrill from your reprint, *The Lost Club* by Arthur Machen. Machen is one of my favorite authors—the others being Poe and our own H. P. Lovecraft—and I read over his *Black Seal* whenever I feel in the need of a good shiver and WT isn't out yet. *The Mystery of the Last Guest* left me all goose-pimples. Flanders is always good. I was particularly interested by *In a Graveyard*, as I once did just what the leading character is described as doing—wrote a story in a cemetery. Of course, I had no encounter with either the Undead or a ghost—something I have never ceased to be thankful for."

October Issue a Corker

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The October WEIRD TALES is a corker; one hundred per cent better than the preceding issue. It's a toss-up between two stories for first place: *The Six Sleepers* by Edmond Hamilton or *The Cold Gray God* by C. L. Moore. These two tales are exceptional both in uniqueness of plot and their ability to keep the eyes of the reader glued to the printed page, and both are thought-inspiring. Arthur Machen comes next with that strange little reprint story, *The Lost Club*, a truly different tale with a most unusual theme. As a rule the work of English writers is not to be compared with our own present-day fictionists, but Machen is one of the few exceptions. And while I am on that subject, why devote so many pages of WEIRD TALES to the work of English authors? John Flanders' work is certainly nothing to 'rave' about and, although Arlton Eadie has given us some good stories, such as *The Siren of the Snakes* and *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*, his current novel, *The Carnival of Death*, continues to 'get no better' as the months go by. It was a pleasure to meet-up with Jules de Grandin again, and *Hollywood Horror* was the best about Doctor Satan to date, although I much prefer Paul Ernst as a writer of science-fiction. *In a Graveyard* by the Binder brothers provided an entertaining fifteen minutes. How's this for a suggestion? Why not prepare an 'All-Star' number for sometime in the not too remote future? You could feature the first part of a new novel by either A. Merritt or Jack Williamson, perhaps one similar to *The Moon Pool* or *Golden Blood*, while the rest of the contents would consist of

novelettes and shorts by F. B. Long, Jr., Lovecraft, Hamilton, Moore, Price, Smith, Morgan and Howard. That should make an issue well-nigh incomparable."

At Full Strength

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The October issue found WT returning to its full strength of weird stories. Even the Doctor Satan story, *Hollywood Horror,* is weird enough to make me forget it is a detective tale. . . . I enjoyed each story very much. *The Six Sleepers* by Edmond Hamilton works slowly up to a very exciting climax. *The Cold Gray God* is another masterpiece by C. L. Moore. Jules de Grandin is active once again in Seabury Quinn's *The Dead-Alive Mummy. The Mystery of the Last Guest* by John Flanders is an excellent tale of a dreadful menace, which is suggested, making the story extra creepy. The plot begins to thicken in Arlton Eadie's serial about the Golden Mummy, *The Carnival of Death. In a Graveyard* by Eando Binder and *The Amulet of Hell* by Robert Russell are two short tales that possess powerful climaxes. My selections for first, second, and third places are, respectively, *The Mystery of the Last Guest, The Cold Gray God,* and *In a Graveyard.* Miss Drake's suggestion of a weird information department in WT is worthy of consideration. I do think, however, that those who make their living as magicians would object to the exposé of magic tricks—if that is what Miss Drake means by magical information. With the settlement of this point I second the motion."

From an Old Reader

Edward L. Gilroy, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for more years than I really like to remember. As a matter of fact I have a complete file of the magazine from the first issue to the present one. I notice the squawks each month by various readers that they like this or they don't like that, but, on the whole, I find that there is an assortment of stories that should please the average reader, and what more could a person expect? . . . As to covers, I have been an admirer of Brundage's work for a long time."

Wolf-head

Charles H. Deems, of Hill Top, Arkansas, writes: "Every story in the October issue of

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WEIRD TALES was excellent. By all odds *The Six Sleepers,* by Edmond Hamilton, surely should take first place, as it does with me. This story had everything. M. Brundage, I think, should have painted the cover more like the description of the scene from which the picture was taken. Example: the story stated the wolf had a human head, while on the cover it was an ordinary, but mighty artistic, wolf. The Doctor Satan series promises to be more interesting than I thought they would. . . . *The Lost Club* reprint for October was excellent, and slightly amusing; I enjoyed it very much. I'm in favor of a department on weird information. WEIRD TALES will then be perfect."

First Kick in Ten Years

Mary Ann Carter, of Kansas City, writes: "I have read WEIRD TALES so long that I can't remember what year I started, but it is at least ten years ago; so I think I am entitled to my first kick. More stories of the weird type and less of the scientific fiction, of which there are several magazines of the type on the market; also the same of the detective type. We buy the book for the uncanny things, not science. . . . Keep the cover as it is, women or gargoyles, whichever may be more appropriate. M. Brundage has the right idea. Keep the magazine in a class by itself with the unusual, and less of what we can find in other magazines. Thanks for many hours of entertainment, and I am looking forward to more."

Edmond Hamilton's Stories

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "I must thank you for securing those masterpieces of science-fiction by Edmond Hamilton. I refer to *The Avenger from Atlantis* and *The Six Sleepers.* Don't let the kickers stop you from printing weird-scientific stories. They rank among the best."

A Pioneer Reader Comments on WT

Annette Velkers, of Brooklyn, writes: "It is so long ago since I first started reading WEIRD TALES that I am not sure of the exact number of years, but I should say about thirteen. I started with one of your first issues and have been reading it ever since. In all that time the story that stayed in my mind most vividly was *The Gray Death,* which you recently reprinted. *The Three Marked Pennies* is another story which I am sure I will not soon forget. As to serials, *Invaders from the Dark* by Greye La Spina, *The Solitary Hunters,* and *The Carnival of Death,* which is now running, are the types I like best. And one of your issues always seems incomplete if Jules de Grandin is not in it. He never grows tiresome. . . . I suppose I must comment on the cover also. You may put on whatever type cover you choose as long as WEIRD TALES is in big letters. However, of all the covers you have ever had, I think the first black and jade one, illustrating a scene, I think, in *Black Colossus,* was the best. I hope you go on printing WEIRD TALES for many years to come."

Random Remarks by an Author

Robert Bloch, of Milwaukee, writes: "I have just bought the new WT. I immediately became engrossed in C. L. Moore's fine story, *The Cold Gray God.* It's a swell yarn —a real *cosmic* tale, with vivid power to evoke the *unnamable.* Undoubtedly it is this issue's best. Noticed the Binderian effort, and of course, Smith's swell translation of Charley Baudelaire. Good stuff. By the way —Clark Ashton Smith has three poems in a vast anthology of 'The World's Best Poetry.' He deserves it, too."

Old Controversies

Clifford F. Shine, of Denver, writes: "I saw something funny in WT last night, so I thought I would write to tell you and the readers about it. I was reading some old issues of mine, and while I was glancing through the Eyrie of some of them I found that the controversy on nudes was going on more than two years ago. Now since it cannot be settled, why not print a nude one month and an anti-nude the next? Some of the suggestions were pretty good, though. One was to print an issue in the middle of the month containing a book-length novel and to quit printing them in the regular issue as serials. This can be improved upon, so here is my suggestion. Print a midmonth issue containing stories asked for as reprints which are too long for the regular issue, and by all means continue with the present form of one serial in every issue. Another controversy almost equal in fame to the one on nudes is that controversy on interplanetary tales. Those who protest always make one or two exceptions, and since the editor

cannot tell an exception from any other interplanetary tale before it is printed, why not let him decide which to print and which not to print? He seems to have done a pretty good job of editing so far, with only a mistake now and then—and we all make them; so why not let him edit the magazine without so many telling him how to do it? Although I have only read two stories in the October issue so far, I think that they are both exceptionally good. *The Six Sleepers* is an extremely good story; however, did you notice that it said in the story that the wolf-man had human features, but try as I would I could not see anything human about the face on the cover. Outside of that (which is really not objectionable) it was absolutely perfect. *The Carnival of Death* is, I think, the very best serial you have ever printed (which is saying plenty). My compliments to Arlton Eadie."

Local Lad Makes Good

J. Wellington, of Mt. Vernon, Illinois, writes: "Just finished the October issue and I call it the best in a long time. The cover was perfect: the nude against the background of weird horror. And I was tickled to see *The Amulet of Hell* by Robert Leonard Russell. I was glad to see that some magazine has at last appreciated Russell's work. He is a local kid who's done a lot of really good writing—heretofore unpublished. I believe you've discovered a coming writer in young Russell. Let's have more of Russell's stuff. *The Six Sleepers* was a huge hit—almost as good as *The Avenger from Atlantis*. Doctor Satan improves with each tale. *Hollywood Horror* is swell."

Never Disappointed

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "No matter what my address may be, I still read WEIRD TALES. And I am never disappointed. . . . Now for the current number (October). Artistic license is all very well, but it doesn't seem logical to me that the girl (shown on the cover) would be wearing any footwear at all. *The Six Sleepers* and *The Cold Gray God* tie for first place. I have recently noticed the rejuvenation of Edmond Hamilton. His recent tales have been better than ever. C. L. Moore is always refreshingly different. I welcome Moore's stories as a means of escaping from the material into a realm of utter

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fantasy. More power to Moore. The Jules de Grandin story is very good. The short stories are not so well done, though *In a Graveyard* is a nice piece of work. . . . I'm glad to see that Conan is returning. Couldn't Howard revive King Kull? I hadn't read *Once in a Thousand Years* when I wrote my last letter or I would have rated it rather highly. I was delighted with it . . . In the very first issue of WT which I read was the best story I've read in this magazine by C. A. Smith. It was *The End of the Story*. I'd like to see it reprinted, and also *Burnt Things* by R. C. Sandison. I'm not much in favor of Miss Drake's suggestion as to a department of weird information. You used to run departments, but it's better to keep this a fiction magazine. . . . May WT go on to even greater heights in 1936."

The September WT

William J. Smith, of New Brunswick, New Jersey, writes: "I should like to comment upon the September issue of WEIRD TALES. Of them all, I thought that *The Shambler from the Stars* was the best. I did not think that *The Man Who Chained the Lightning* was as good as the first in the Doctor Satan series, but I enjoyed it nevertheless. The short stories and the poetry seemed unusually good, especially *The Toad Idol* and *Night Song*."

Through the Vortex

Orby Martin, of Grove, Oklahoma, writes: "Will you please reprint *Through the Vortex*, by Donald Edward Keyhoe? It originally appeared in WEIRD TALES. I surely enjoyed *The Cold Gray God* by C. L. Moore. I like stories of Mars."

Three Cheers for Doc Satan

Herbert H. Hillier, of Cooperstown, Pennsylvania, writes: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for almost three years and have not yet voiced my opinion in the Eyrie. I wish to congratulate you on your fine publication and certainly wish to give three cheers for Paul Ernst's Doctor Satan series. Why not give us more really creepy ghost or vampire stories and less weird sorcery stuff? I can't think of anything more disgusting than a lot of slippery, slimy stuff creeping around the deck of some ship. And wouldn't it be possible to do away with some of this monster-god stuff? That gets

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912,

Of Weird Tales, published monthly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for October 1, 1935.

State of Illinois }
County of Cook } ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Weird Tales and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Wm. R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is_____ (This information is required from daily publications only.)

WM. R. SPRENGER,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1935. M. C. TRAVERS,
[SEAL] Notary Public.

My commission expires February 3, 1937.

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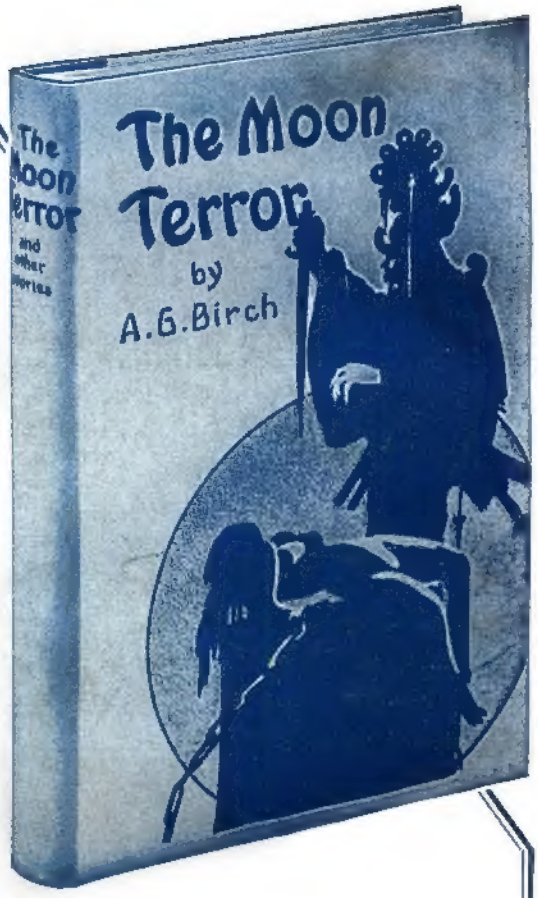

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